



# A New England

An English identity within Britain

Speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr), 14 March 2005  
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Throughout my political career I have put strong communities and active citizenship at the forefront of my beliefs and actions. That is no accident – I was born into a strong community in which people supported each other and individuals flourished through mutual commitment. Self reliance and hard work were accepted as a given but were fostered and made possible by the support of others. At work and in the community, people stood by each other and helped out their neighbours, in times of sorrow and joy. Community was not an abstract term drawn from the books of political theory. It was a lived experience.

The Sheffield community of my childhood has changed beyond all recognition in the last forty or so years – for good and ill. But the concept of community has not lost its purpose or relevance. It remains a powerful motivating force for public and voluntary action. And in Sheffield today, you can see – in the local Sure Start programmes, the parenting support projects, the social enterprises and much, much more – the real fruits of the investment the Labour government has made in renewing our society.

A strong community is not an anachronism. Indeed, the rapidity of social and economic change in the world we inhabit makes community more, not less, relevant. Communities can support people to face new challenges – to learn new skills, adapt to change at work, juggle the demands of work and family life or take the first steps out of poverty. This is the proper locus of public action: helping people to help themselves.

People participate in their communities when they have confidence, self-respect and hope. Developing their capabilities is therefore critical and a material asset stake – whether held by individuals or the community at large – can provide the platform for social inclusion. But community also depends on feelings of attachment and solidarity. And as communities have become less structured by clear social class boundaries, traditional roles for men and women, and the geographical focal points of major local workplaces, so the question of how we can sustain common identities has become more pressing.

We need to feel more secure in our identity if we are to face the world with confidence. We live in an age of rapid migration and increased international interdependence. New forms of political alliance, such as the European Union, have become more important. The question of national identity therefore rises to the fore: is it more important to articulate a shared sense of national identity in conditions of flux and change? If so, how can we reconcile this with diversity, openness and pluralism of belief and practice? And critically, what does this mean for the English? Is a renewed sense of Englishness an important component of Britishness, alongside Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish patriotic sentiment?

These are the questions I want to address in this lecture. I will start by examining why we should care about identity and patriotic feeling, before moving on to discuss why a renewed sense of English identity can be a progressive force for good within an overarching account of Britishness. I will outline what Englishness means to me and offer some thoughts on how it can be expressed through a new focus on neighbourhood and locality.

## The politics of identity - why identity matters

National identity is a hard thing for anyone to talk about. What after all, is more nebulous and elusive than a nation's identity? But it is a particularly hard thing for politicians to talk about. For when they do, they are generally accused, from the left of chauvinism and, from the right, of treachery – or at least lack of patriotism. No doubt my comments today will court these accusations. Nevertheless, I think it is extremely important that politicians, and especially progressive, social democratic politicians, do talk about national identity.

Let me say why.

An important current of thought, that runs all the way from the ancient Stoics, through Kant and Marx, to modern day thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum, argues that we should be wary of patriotism. It bids us to block our ears to the siren call of nationalism. It argues that identities arising from membership of a nation tend to be uniquely intolerant and partial. Looking outwards, they set nations against each other. Looking inwards, they give the culturally dominant group – the 'Nation' – the licence to neglect, or at worse persecute, minorities.

But how powerful are these arguments? They assume first, that national sentiment is something that can be suppressed or eradicated. But is this really so? Certainly, some people have a stronger sense of national identity than others. And a tiny minority of people – people who perhaps spend their lives moving from one place to another – have hardly any sense of national belonging at all. But most people do have firm ties to one or sometimes, even two or three, countries, even if it some times takes a terrible event – an attack on their homeland, the outbreak of a war, a natural disaster – to make them appreciate how strong those ties are.

I believe that there is a real danger that if we simply neglect or talk down national identity – people's sense of common belonging and shared values – we risk creating a festering, resentful national identity, an identity based not on confidence but on grievance. Indeed, if we look at the most unattractive examples of nationalism, they usually have their roots in the nationalists' belief, true or otherwise, that they have been denied their birthright – that a foreign power, or an overly cosmopolitan, unpatriotic ruling class has prevented them from being who they really are.

But the reason that I believe that extreme cosmopolitans, and their close cousins, extreme multiculturalists, are wrong, can be put much more positively than this. It is not just that national feeling can become dangerous if it is not allowed to express itself. A sense of identity, patriotism, or whatever we chose to call it, can in fact be a progressive and generous force. We are much more likely to share things with each other, where we feel a sense of shared identity. It is no coincidence that modern representative democracy first emerged in countries with strong national cultures like the Netherlands, Sweden, or indeed Britain. It is no coincidence that the unifying struggle against Hitler was followed by the Labour landslide of 1945.

Indeed, I believe that a strong and confident sense of national identity can itself be a spur to internationalism. True, patriotism is not as exacting a thing as pure internationalism: patriots believe we owe compatriots things that we don't owe people further away from home. But some nations with a strong sense of identity – Sweden is perhaps an example – define themselves by their internationalism, and are generous with their foreign aid and play a key role in the UN and other international institutions. Closer to home, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, together with Jack Straw and Hilary Benn, have used their strength and clarity of purpose in domestic affairs as a foundation for Britain to offer leadership and vision in both international affairs and the fight against world poverty.

All these considerations point to a similar conclusion: those on the social democratic left should acknowledge and honour national sentiment, rather than look down on it. Of course we should not welcome or cultivate all expressions of national pride. Patriotism sometimes has a racist or bigoted face. But nations like the US or Canada have managed to cultivate a non-ethnic non-racially based identity for themselves. They show it can be done.

The need to attend to the desire for national belonging has perhaps never been greater than it is today. We live, after all, in disorientating times. We are a more mobile, more connected world than ever before. Our football teams employ foreign players; our supermarket shelves are stacked with foreign produce. London, it is said, is the most cosmopolitan, ethnically diverse city in the world.

These changes largely account for the worrying rise of the far right in many European countries, including, to some extent, here in the UK. It is the increased sense of insecurity, instability and the impact of rapid change that reinforce the need for a sense of a common home. It is vital, in this context, that we on the progressive left, respond to people's worries, and speak to their desire to belong to a country with traditions and values. And it is vital we as a nation define those traditions and values in an open and liberal way.

Too often in the past, we on the British left have failed to offer a civic, open view of our national identity. We have let those on the right claim the patriotic mantle all for themselves.

However, I honestly believe that we as a Labour Party and government have made great strides in this area over the last five to ten years and, to some degree, we are almost uniquely well positioned, among European nations, to move towards a more open, multi-ethnic understanding of society. We have finally got beyond the years of disorientation and uncertainty that followed the loss of Empire, and are now an influential international player once again. This time, as the best connected nation in the world, we can work with other nations to achieve progressive ends.

The citizenship curriculum I introduced as Education Secretary, and the citizenship ceremonies and tests I introduced as Home Secretary, will help generate a more civic, more tolerant, but in some respects more demanding, sense of what being British entails. I'm very pleased that, since 26 February 2004, around 45,000 adults have attended ceremonies. Some local authorities like Brent, where the first ceremony took place, hold citizenship ceremonies throughout the week. This is a very welcome development.

## **The Britishness debate**

Yet despite these signs of progress, it remains the case that too often public discourse in Britain has failed to pay sufficient attention to debates about national identities and questions about whom we are and the values that we share. This is why Gordon Brown's British Council speech on the meaning of Britishness last year is to be greatly welcomed.<sup>1</sup> As he rightly argues, only by developing a 'shared vision of national identity' will we be able to address the complex challenges currently facing us. Our response to debates about Europe, immigration and asylum, citizenship, and our relations with the rest of the world, are governed by the values underpinning our national identity.

Britishness is defined not on ethnic and exclusive grounds – but through our shared values, our history of tolerance, of openness and internationalism, our commitment to democracy and liberty, to civic duty and the public space. These values, embodied in our great institutions – such as the NHS, the BBC, the Open University – tell a national story that is open to all British citizens. This vision of Britishness both embraces the diversity of our multi-national, diverse state, *and* unites us through our values, history, culture and institutions. It provides a shared framework for national and local identities. Thus an overarching British identity is compatible with – indeed it is actually strengthened by – the celebration of the national identities of Britain.

It is my intention today to focus on England and Englishness. This is especially important because of all Britain's national identities, English identity and Englishness has proved the most elusive and challenging. At times the English appear to be the most reluctant to champion their national identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Brown, *British Council Annual Lecture*, 7 July 2002.

## The state of Englishness today

In recent years we have seen a rise – albeit a modest one – in the number of people thinking of themselves as English, suggesting an increasing sense of English self-consciousness.

In 1992 just 31 per cent of the English when asked about their national identity would respond by saying they were English. In 2003 this had risen to 40 per cent.

Similarly, in 1997 just 24 per cent of people when asked about their national identity said that they were either ‘English’ or ‘more English than British’. This had risen to 36 per cent by 2003.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence of a rising English national consciousness can be seen at sporting venues – by the thousands who can now be seen waving the flag of St George at football and rugby matches. As I found when I was in Lisbon for Euro 2004 last June there was nothing jingoistic or threatening about those who gathered in the sunshine of the main square and signed a big flag laid across the ground and helped with the “fans embassy”. It was the thugs back home we had to worry about. Similar outbursts of patriotic feeling greeted the English team’s success in the Rugby Union World Championship. Success is often a driver of national pride!

Nobody argues against celebrating St Patrick, St Andrew or St David – for many it is a chance to share in each other’s traditions. Let us hope that a similar spirit can be found on St George’s Day.

St George’s Day itself is seen as a much more important event than it was in the past. I’m told that some people have even started sending Happy St George’s Day cards.

## The puzzle of Englishness: an identity in crisis?

However, Englishness remains relatively imprecise, ambiguous and ill-defined. As such it is sometimes claimed that there is a ‘crisis’ of English identity. The English, it is argued, do not know who they are. The English do seem to have less of a tradition of reflection on national identity than other nations. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume remarked that: ‘The English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such’.<sup>3</sup>

But why is this? In part it has to do with the historic conflation of Englishness and Britishness. The historian, Linda Colley, demonstrates how a British identity was successfully forged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> But the establishment of British identity was to have major implications for English identity. England and Britain became so entwined as to be almost indistinguishable.

However, as the dominant partner in the Union, English identity was diluted, deliberately played down, and even suppressed so as to successfully integrate what was initially the British Isles into what became the three nations of Britain and Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. According to the academic Krishan Kumar, whereas the Scots and Welsh reconciled and sustained their own distinctive identities within an overarching British identity, the English found it much more difficult to do so.<sup>5</sup> This partly explains why the English have been left without their own distinct institutions, icons and civic celebrations.

Some historians have argued that as the historic factors ‘gluing’ Britishness together began to unravel in the twentieth century – the loss of religious identity and particularly the decline of the protestant faith; loss of Empire and Britain’s status as a global economic power; the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism – England and the English have been left feeling unsure about themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> This data is taken from recent British Social Attitudes surveys which have been tracking the state of national identities.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, ‘Of National Character’, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, in (ed.) E. Miller 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

This confusion may also have been exacerbated by new 'challenges', both internal and external, to Englishness, which emerged in the form of devolution, European integration and much greater movement of people across the world and the perception of greater inward migration. Bernard Crick perhaps best captured this state of affairs, writing, 'We English must come to terms with ourselves'.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently debates about Englishness have raged from all quarters. Some theorists believe that England and Englishness had actually ceased to be. Roger Scruton wrote a book titled '*England an Elegy*';<sup>7</sup> while David Starkey suggested that, 'England, like Rome is dead ... it has become a place of the mind'.<sup>8</sup> Others – the 'disintegration' or 'separatist' theorists – saw this as an opportunity, insisting that the only way the English could come to terms with themselves and renew and develop a genuine national identity would be by breaking free of the Union. Such views were espoused by an unholy alliance of Conservatives on the right and radicals, such as Tom Nairn and Richard Weight on the left.<sup>9</sup>

I reject this view. There is a place for a renewed sense of English identity within an overarching Britishness. But it must be an open and pluralistic identity, which I will now elaborate on.

## Rejecting English Exclusiveness

One reaction to the confusion over Englishness has been the promotion of an *exclusive* Englishness and an appeal to the particular. Predominantly championed by the right, this is characterised by its opposition to Europe, to immigration and asylum and a general insularity and defensiveness. It uses the language of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', claiming that outsiders threaten English identity. This expression of Englishness is often defined in ethnic terms – along nineteenth century lines of blood, soil and territory – of which 'England for the English' is the most unsavoury manifestation.

Enoch Powell was the most prominent politician to articulate such a position.<sup>10</sup> He blamed our overseas adventures and England's outward looking, cosmopolitan past for undermining English identity. The English needed to come home, back to Little England. Powell sought to emphasise the homogeneity and purity of what he called the 'old English'. Fortunately, his views gained little credence in the 1960s and 1970s but the tendency to fearfulness and parochialism continues with those arguing that 'the English have become foreigners in their own country'. Aspects of the Powellite tradition live on in the populist anti-EU slogans of 'Up yours Delors' to the more sinister and xenophobic stance of the BNP.

This has given English identity a slightly menacing face, and consequently has discouraged the celebration of Englishness. The English feel as though they can't talk about their identity for fear of association with the (far) right. At times it seems as though the flag of St George and the language of identity have been hijacked by these minorities.

That this sort of exclusiveness has arisen in the first place highlights the failure of the political class to discredit these exclusive narratives. The left, in particular, has been conspicuously absent from these debates. Orwell aside, the left has generally shied away from the politics of national identities, having been historically pre-occupied with class identities and preferring instead to demonstrate their international credentials.

The failure to challenge ethnically based, exclusionary accounts of Englishness has meant that, when polled, those that describe themselves as 'unambiguously English' do have a greater

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Crick, 'The English and the British', in (ed) B Crick, *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom*, Blackwell, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, Pimlico, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> David Starkey, 'Daze of Empire', *Guardian*, 11 January, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Simon Heffer, *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999; Tom Nairn, *After Britain*, Granta, 2000; Richard Weight, *Patriot: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000*, Macmillan, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See in particular his speech to the Royal Society of St George on St George's Day 1968.

tendency to be against Europe, and are more likely to be suspicious of immigration. They also seem to associate 'being English' with being born in England. This might explain why so many of England's black and Asian populations, when asked, say they are British not English.

But it is clear that this exclusive account of Englishness can be credibly and demonstrably rejected. It is based on myth and misrepresentation. We need to articulate a progressive account of Englishness, to champion Englishness, expressed through our history, culture, and civic values. It demands that we tell a more honest account of the distinctive English tradition and English history. The challenge is to recast Englishness and English identity, exploring its place within the Union and its relationship with Europe and the wider world. In doing so we will enrich our understanding and sense of identity, and will be better equipped to deal with the challenges we face.

## Englishness: A Progressive Account

It is clear that Powell's homogeneous and pure Englishness lacks a sound historical basis. The 'old English' (supposedly comprising, Angles, Jutes, Celts, Saxons, Normans and Vikings from Scandinavia) past he craved was fictional. The English tradition is evidently mongrel, multi-national, and multiethnic.

As Daniel Defoe put it in his poem *The True Born Englishman* – itself written as an attack on those who demonised foreigners in England – 'from a mixture all kinds began, that heter'ogeneous thing an Englishman'.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth recalling that the archetypal English caricature, John Bull, was actually created by a Scotsman (while the kilt was invented by an Englishman). The chestnut tree, such a permanent feature of the English garden, was originally brought over from Pakistan. While the first chair of English literature in the world was established in Scotland, at Edinburgh University in 1762.

Equally Roger Scruton's elegy for England misrepresents Englishness. England is assumed dead because it has changed out of recognition, but this is one version, and a partial version, of the English national story.

The decision by Parliament to ban foxhunting was followed by cries of 'goodbye England'. Such impressions of England stem from a narrow account of England. There is more to England than the romantic image of the village green and the maids cycling to communion in the mist, as John Major offered in his 1993 Orwell-inspired eulogy. As Philip Dodd has argued, the incredible thing is the lack of choice on offer when it comes to the English story.<sup>12</sup> Krishan Kumar argues that this image itself is much younger than we think, invented in the early twentieth century during what he has called 'the moment of Englishness', and intended to give some comfort to an English public concerned about the prospects of the Empire's retreat and to counter the revival of Celtic nationalism – in other words in not too dissimilar times to those now, in which the right have themselves revived the England of Baldwin to oppose Europe and conceive change only in terms of threat and not opportunity.

Why are we wedded to such a traditional and conservative national story which feels unconfident and insecure about change? A closer reading of English history reveals a much more radical and passionate past. The scale and pace of change in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in the era of Charles I, the Glorious Revolution, the Industrial revolution and franchise reform – do not conform to images which suggest we are averse to change. On the contrary, it shows our restless and pioneering tradition.

History shows that the English have something profound to offer us when it comes to nationalism. During the 'Springtime of Nations' in the nineteenth century, when European nationalism was on

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The True Born Englishman*, 1701.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Dodd, *The Battle Over Britain*, Demos, 1996.



the rise and exclusively defined, the English, in building Great Britain and the British Empire, were instead constructing an inclusive identity, and a common sense of civic citizenship, one that was outward not inward looking. The obvious analogy here is Europe: in the eighteenth century, the English ruling class – mainly Tories – did not question the decision to build a political union with Scotland in order to pursue the English national interest. We may wonder why they find it so hard today?

The Little England view is precisely that, little. It forgets the larger, adventurous, trading and international spirit of the English. We are an island people who have gone out into the world to learn and explore.

The important thing that this teaches us that: we need to debate and discuss the English national story. It isn't a closed book. As I referred to above, the citizenship education, tests and ceremonies I introduced as Home Secretary will spark this debate for new immigrants in England, while citizenship education I introduced as Education Secretary, will do so in the school curriculum.

## What England means to me: dimensions of Englishness

So what does England mean to me?

To me Englishness is made up from a jigsaw. A jigsaw which, like every nation in the world, starts with the smallest piece – the neighbourhood and community in which we live. But there is something distinctive about our particular cities and counties in which we live. We have an affinity with towns and counties which is not based on a region or province (created as an administrative or political unit), nor mobilized as a rallying cry for separation (as with the Basque country) but acts, rather, as a building block for patriotic sentiment. Coming from Yorkshire and being English – and beating Lancashire at cricket – is a statement about our localism and our Englishness. Equally, my pride in Sheffield, its competitiveness with Leeds and its historic hegemony, all affect my view.

I will look at this question further in what follows. But to explore what Englishness means to me, it might help if I outline what would I celebrate on St George's Day. Here are some personal suggestions:

- *English landscapes and the sea.* The English feel a deep attachment to their landscapes and to their coastlines. This is the Englishness of the National Trust and our National Parks; of Octavia Hill, the Fabians, William Morris, the Socialist cycling groups and the Ramblers. Today, this heritage has been given new impetus by Labour's Right to Roam policy and the new National Parks.
- *Urban landscapes.* Although we have a powerful attachment to the land, we are an urban people who have crafted ingenious and varied cityscapes, particularly in our great Victorian cities. My city of Sheffield demonstrates the beauty and power of civic pride that can be found in our best urban landscapes.
- *The English poetical tradition.* The English are a poetic people. Just think of our poetical tradition, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Milton to John Keats and Wilfred Owen. My personal favourites are the nineteenth and twentieth century poets Christina Rossetti and Philip Larkin (who was quintessentially English). Think too of contemporary English poets such as Tony Harrison and Wendy Cope.
- *English music.* I am an aficionado of folk music and of traditional English carols – the village carol. The English have also produced some of the world's finest pop music from the 1960s onwards. Our choral music has been revived. And on St George's Day, we should, of course, celebrate our finest composers: Purcell, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and

Britten. To that list we should add Delius, who always gets left out because of his German parentage but who was born in Bradford and is buried in Surrey.

- *The English democratic tradition.* We are a democratic people who crafted the common law and a gradualist democratic tradition. You do not have to be a Whig historian to write a proud history of democracy stretching back to the Magna Carta.
- *English Radicalism.* The English radical tradition is an eclectic and varied one, and aside from the seventeenth century, it has been largely reformist rather than revolutionary. I would honour writers and agitators such as John Wesley, Tom Paine, William Hazlitt, William Cobbett, the Pankhursts and George Orwell; and collective movements, such as the Levellers, the Chartists and the Matchgirl strikers. I would also reserve particular pride for the radicals of the abolitionist movement, including William Wilberforce, Robert Wedderburn and Olaudah Equiano (a major figure in Black English history of whom I confess I knew little until I began preparing this speech).
- *English humour.* As George Mikes said when writing on this subject, “*English humour resembles the Loch Ness Monster in that both are famous but there is a strong suspicion that neither of them exists. Here the similarity ends: the Loch Ness Monster seems to be a gentle beast and harms no one; English humour is cruel*”. English culture is replete with a particular kind of understated humour. We are a nation that loves satire, irony and self-deprecating wit, and which revels in the absurd and nonsensical. My personal favourites are Tony Hancock, Round the Horne, Fawlty Towers, Monty Python and Dead Ringers. I also love Alan Bennett, who once wrote: “*Mark my words, when a society has to resort to the lavatory for its humour, the writing is on the wall.*”

## Civic Englishness

As I hope these suggestions demonstrate, there is much we can celebrate about Englishness, in a way that both recognises and gains from diversity and which is driven by strong values which unite people of different backgrounds. In a liberal, plural society we should aim for integration with diversity. We can achieve this without seeking on the one hand to deny English culture and history; or on the other, asking people, particularly new citizens, to assimilate to a mono-culture that doesn't exist and never has done.

It is the particular strength of Britishness that it can accommodate plural national and ethnic identities. A more confident, progressive Englishness, rooted in its inclusive past is not only compatible with a civic value-led sense of Britishness, but it is strengthened from its position in a multi-national Union. The disintegration theorists – who believe that England can only renew itself by breaking the Union – fail to appreciate that celebrating Englishness does not deny our Britishness or vice versa, or any other identities we hold. Here in Britain we know how to do plural identities. I can be proud of my Sheffield identity, at the same time as being proud of my Englishness and Britishness. They are not in competition with each other. As Linda Colley has said, ‘identities are not like hats’ – what is important is what they have in common.<sup>13</sup>

The Labour Party is the vehicle for expressing and celebrating a renewed Englishness within an overarching British identity. Labour is quite clearly the party of the Union, following the collapse of the Tories in Scotland and Wales, but we are also the party for championing all the identities of Britain.

That means finding a new place for an open, progressive Englishness. We can't afford repeats of the infamous entry for Wales in the 1911 Encyclopedia Britannia which simply stated, ‘see England’. And there are already signs of this: the English are comfortable and content in a post-

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<sup>13</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, Yale University Press, 1992.

devolved UK. The English do not resent the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh National Assembly. A more assured sense of English identity is good for England *and* the Union.

## The locality and English civic tradition

So how should Englishness be expressed in political terms? It is widely accepted that national identities are expressed and entrenched through institutions. But there is no appetite whatsoever for an English Parliament,<sup>14</sup> while the failure of the “Yes” vote in the North East confirmed to me the need to express our sense of English identity and shared values at the local rather than regional level.

The English have strong attachments to locality. In his recent pamphlet on localism, Simon Jenkins refers to the 1969 Royal Commission on Local Government and the test of identity its staff developed called the “Marbella Test”.<sup>15</sup> One Briton meets another on the beach in the Marbella and asks from where he comes. Outside of England, the first answer is Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. But for the English it is locality. For the inhabitants of the big cities, Manchester, Birmingham or Sheffield is the answer. For those who hail from smaller towns or villages, the answer is always twofold: this or that village in so and so county.

There are some convincing reasons for this. We English have a strong sense of commitment to our locality and have historically held strong local identities. In opinion polls we consistently rank ‘local area’ above region, nation and Europe. The local diversity that we have in England – be it in dialect, culture, humour, peculiar traditions, to name but a few – were identified by both Orwell and Betjeman as central to the English character. This rich diversity is now accessible online through the archives of the British Library.

We also have a strong tradition of local democracy that goes back to the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic democracy and which remains constant throughout our history, through the Tudors, to the municipal socialism of the twentieth century, right up to the present. Our shires and cities have long historical pedigree as seats of local government.

In government I made active citizenship and democratic renewal a central concern of my political agenda. It is in the locality that citizenship is played out and where the great civic tradition is brought to life. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Victorian city-states, notably Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. The English love of ‘associations’ flourished at the local level. A similar tale can be told of parish democracy and historic shire counties.

We need to build on this commitment to locality as an expression of English civic identity.

I believe we will anchor this revival of localism first in our neighbourhoods, and then in our towns, cities and counties. The five year plan recently published by John Prescott got this exactly right. It said:

*Making more real opportunities for all communities to exercise power – in partnership with local authorities – will give many more people a genuine stake in our democracy and create more inclusive and cohesive communities.*

*People’s sense of place is not straightforward. Sometimes, and for some things – clean streets, the local park, the local primary school – people identify most with their street or block or village; and it is this neighbourhood that holds the answer. For other things – for example, work or transport – people think and care more about a wider area, their town, county, city or region.*

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<sup>14</sup> Just 16% of respondents to a 2003 British Social Attitudes Survey supported the idea of an English Parliament. *British Social Attitudes: The 21<sup>st</sup> Report*, 2004/05.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Jenkins, *Big Bang, New Localism*, Policy Exchange, 2004.

*So we are not dogmatic about how decisions should be made – we want more chances for communities to get involved and make decisions, but we also know there are things that are best sorted out by good, strong local authorities”.*

A revival of community identity must be built from the bottom up – from new forms of neighbourhood civic association and community self-government. But it will also mean a renewal of local government, in new and imaginative ways. There is no prospect of a return to any supposed golden age of local government. But there is the potential for a reformed local government to push forward the democratic agenda and provide innovative solutions to economic and social problems.

In particular, whatever specific form it takes, I am a strong believer in the potential of city government. City leaders can drive forward economic renewal - brokering partnerships with investors, business organizations, further education colleges and universities, and ensuring critical investments in the transport infrastructure.

Today we are experiencing an urban renaissance in our core cities. Civic pride is being restored. A cultural renewal is underway. Cities offer real quality of life to their residents – particularly the enjoyment of the arts and sports – and they are magnets for their surrounding areas.

So the active city agenda is here to stay. In that regard, I very much welcome the launch of a new Centre for Cities at the ippr. I sure it will add real value to the research and policymaking underpinning the urban renaissance.

## **Conclusion**

We can build a new sense of English identity, finding its place among the plural identities of the United Kingdom and supporting a wider sense of Britishness. Englishness can be experienced, asserted and celebrated in the fabric of our existence as a community: in our habits, casts of mind, the culture that we daily create and re-create. We can find it in our traditions of fairness and civic duty and in our spirit of imagination and invention.

In this way, we can overcome bigotry, insularity and hostility. The English have always been diverse and outward looking. We are an open, trading and enterprising people who have traveled the world and given it great science, literature and sport. We can have pride in ourselves and confidence in our future – building outwards from our localities, to a sense of Englishness as part of a United Kingdom and wider European Union.