

More than one English question

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The so-called 'English question' remains one of the most difficult issues to calibrate in British politics. It is most commonly explained as a by-product of the anomalies bequeathed by the unfinished business of devolution undertaken by Tony Blair's first Labour administration. Englishness is widely held to have emerged as a stronger and more independent force in reaction to the inequities resulting from devolution. For many observers it is axiomatic that this shift in national self-awareness can be headed off or rewarded through the achievement of a radically new constitutional settlement.

But it is premature to assume that a rising sense of Englishness implies and requires either the creation of new English political institutions or the end of the Union, though both may become a possibility at some point in the future. Conventional interpretations of the new Englishness overlook its fragmentary, politically ambiguous and febrile character. It should be regarded not just as an independent force, but also as a symptom of deep-lying changes in the experiences and economic position of different social groups. The history, causes and political implications of the resurgence of Englishness indicate the need for greater comprehension of the range of cultural drivers, social changes and political problems that are at stake in relation to this 'question'. This broader-angled approach suggests a different kind of policy framework and a greater sense of when public interventions are likely to be most timely and effective.

It is important to recognise the challenges arising from two vital questions that have been somewhat overlooked in the competition to 'fix' the English question. First, are we witnessing the rebirth of a different kind of Anglo-Britishness, rather than the straightforward rejection of Britain by the English? And, second, is England becoming a political community in its own right?¹ Our current constitutional

thinking tends to make an unhelpful division between those assuming that it can never be one, and those believing that the idea of England as a polity is with us, and we simply await the institutional implementation of this principle. Neither assumption is credible, either as a reading of the direction of travel of the public mood in England, or as the basis for a durable democratic settlement.²

IDENTITY, CULTURE AND BELONGING

The wider usage of specifically English symbols, the public celebration of English traditions, and a growing sense that Englishness is disapproved of by the political elite and most public authorities, have all become more prominent in the last few years. These changes have led some commentators and campaigners to assume that the root and cause of this growing sense of English identification is the devolution programme that Tony Blair's first Labour government introduced. A rising tide of English self-consciousness is, on this reading, the product of and response to changes in the governance arrangements of the UK. This, so the argument runs, has generated a grievance-fuelled politics of resentment towards the inequities and asymmetries associated with the devolution settlement. But this is a partial, and in some respects misleading, account. It neglects the fragmentary complexity of contemporary manifestations of Englishness and wrongly identifies devolution as the sole cause of their emergence.

Running alongside a politicised account of Englishness – which has right-wing, liberal and social democratic variants – a more culturally focused set of enquiries has developed, looking into celebrations of English identity. What does it mean to be English in a diverse, multi-cultural society? When did England become a nation? Is a specifically English set of traditions or cultural characteristics still in existence? These were some of the central questions that animated a great variety of books, magazine articles, newspaper comment pieces, TV series and cultural discussions from the early 1990s. Indeed, this cultural 'moment' of Englishness actually began before the election of the Labour government in 1997 and its devolution reforms.³

From where did this upsurge come? The stirring of Englishness in the 1990s resulted in part from a reaction to a growing tide of nationalist mobilisation in Scotland and, to a lesser degree, Wales. This coincided with a surge in smaller nations demanding recognition and autonomy in Europe and beyond, itself a response to the uncertainties

associated with the globalising processes that were reshaping the economies and cultures of all states in this period. One – though by no means the only or dominant – impulse at work in the rise of Englishness in this era was its role as a catalyst and vehicle for a growing hostility to the most visible manifestations of globalisation: the arrival of new waves of migrants, deposited in some of our most deprived communities.

The return of the European Union to the political agenda in the early 1990s played an important role as well. One part of the Englishness of this era was located within a re-assertion of the Anglo-British values of the Union, expressing hostility towards involvement within a greater supra-national entity. But perhaps the single most significant causal factor at work in the early-mid 1990s was the waning of the cultural power of the narratives of Britishness that had framed and buttressed the Union state since the Second World War. Britain shed the last vestiges of Empire and its public culture began to be associated instead with consumerist individualism and media-fuelled populism.⁴ In this context, some of the long-established, often deferential attitudes that shaped attachments to key British institutions – including Parliament, the monarchy, the BBC and the National Health Service – underwent profound alteration. The hold of some of the major engines shaping a sense of British identity and culture began to weaken in these years.

The work of a number of historians in this area suggests the merits of considering this phenomenon within an even longer time-frame. During the last two centuries, writers such as Richard Weight suggest, English identity and British culture became mutually entangled.⁵ Few thought it mattered if they used 'England' or 'Britain' to refer to the nation. Yet this model of Britishness was designed to be sufficiently capacious for Scottish, Welsh, and for a while Irish, identities to be incorporated within it. Independent ideas of Englishness were downplayed in favour of greater Britain, with the latter sometimes confusingly being named England.⁶

This analysis owes much to the enduring influence of Linda Colley's brilliant analysis of the formation of the British nation in the late eighteenth century, around the pillars of Protestantism, Empire and the 'othering' of Catholic France.⁷ More recent historiography has questioned the validity of Colley's account of popular sensibilities in the four nations.⁸ Furthermore, there has been a misleading tendency to carry forward the spirit of Colley's analysis (which itself ends in the

1830s) into the study of later periods, with the result that historians have sometimes overlooked the fact that a relatively independent sense of English culture and values subsisted throughout the period when Anglo-Britishness was the dominant expression of national identity. The case for an independently constituted English patriotism was made in powerful ways by figures as diverse as G.K. Chesterton, J.B. Priestley, Stanley Baldwin, George Orwell, Tom Wintringham, E.P. Thompson, Enoch Powell and Tony Benn, throughout the last century.⁹

Today's assertion of a more independently minded Englishness, the roots of which pre-dated devolution, should be viewed as the latest chapter in the story of English self-assertion and examination. Contemporary ideas draw heavily upon the nostalgic and Arcadian ways in which England was imaginatively constructed in earlier eras, the Edwardian above all. But current developments are not just a further variation on this theme. For devolution has undoubtedly provided a magnification of, and trigger for, a new bout of English celebration and self-enquiry.

There is certainly evidence that debates around devolution have sparked a greater sense of awareness of, and in some quarters a stronger sense of identification with, Englishness. Pollsters report a marked increase in the proportion of English people prioritising their Englishness from the time of devolution. British Social Attitudes survey data shows that in 1997 59 per cent of people in England considered themselves British, compared to 34 per cent who rated their Englishness as more salient. By 2007 this had changed to 48 per cent and 39 per cent respectively.¹⁰ However, a majority remain comfortable with the idea of holding dual loyalties to England and Britain.¹¹ These findings should act as a brake upon some of the more exaggerated hopes and fears that are attached to the supposed rise of English nationalism. It makes more sense to view the shifts in patterns of national identification and self-definition in England in the last ten years in more ambiguous and cautious ways, for two reasons in particular.

First, it is mistaken to regard Englishness as a singular phenomenon. Much more attention needs to be given to the multiple strands of feeling and sensibility that shape its contemporary expressions. An important development in this respect has been the proliferation and normalisation of manifestations of English symbolism and culture in everyday life. St George's Day is not just the opportunity for right-wing grievance, but is now widely recognised as an opportunity for celebration by schools and councils across the country. A popular

campaign calls for St George's Day to be turned into a bank holiday in England.¹² The reclamation of the flag of St George by football fans contesting the ultra-nationalism and racism that infused the practice of supporting the England football team abroad in the 1980s has been extraordinarily successful over the last decade. This flag has now become a ubiquitous accompaniment to England's participation in sporting events, and has become considerably more 'neutral' in its implications. It has been turned into an everyday commodity – now visible on T-shirts, baseball caps, car windows and mugs. These many and varied practices are contributing to what Michael Billig calls the development of 'banal nationalism'.¹³ In these manifestations, Englishness provides a predominantly cultural, and not avowedly political, form of self-understanding.

Alongside the normalisation of English symbolism and the growth of cultural enquiry into, and celebrations of, Englishness, there has undoubtedly developed a different modality of national identification. This takes the form of an attachment to the identity of England as a medium through which a number of social anxieties and resentments are projected. Devolution and its accompanying issues are not always high among the priorities of this kind of nationalism. Clinging to a picture of an English culture imperilled by an array of social, economic and cultural changes that have been fostered by an indifferent and 'politically correct' government is a frame used by many who see themselves left out of Labour's economic modernism. Such sentiments link together a growing body of opinion in rural and semi-urban constituencies that perceives Labour as an inveterate enemy of its interests and traditions, and regards the decline of some of its key institutions – the village pub, post offices and fox-hunting – as a symptom of the countryside's marginalisation by Labour.¹⁴

Nor are such sentiments confined to rural areas. The *Daily Mail* has led the way in framing Englishness as conflicting with a state-fostered version of multicultural Britishness, with English editions of tabloids such as *The Sun*, *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Star* often mining this seam.¹⁵ How widely such sentiments are shared is hard to say, but there is no reason to doubt that in some anti-Labour quarters the notion of reviving an Englishness that is currently disapproved of by 'politically correct' authorities is a powerful mobilising myth.

A distinct but not entirely unrelated phenomenon is the aggressive deployment of culturally nativist, and sometimes avowedly racist, ideas of national culture and belonging – either English or British or both –

by some members of deprived urban communities. These sentiments underlie a growing chorus of concern about whether the 'white working class' has become the reviled victim of Labour's Britain.¹⁶ The wider context here is the mixture of fear, anxiety and sense of loss associated with a number of changes in the 1990s – shifts in the nature of work, the massive expansion of the service economy, and the rapid decline in the quality of life in poorer communities – and the growing perception that the political class, and Labour in particular, no longer regards these constituencies as central to its electoral ambitions. The current recession is likely to provide a serious intensification of these pressures and perceptions, and could well result in new breeding-grounds for populist nationalism. Englishness has emerged in some quarters as a two-fingered response to a state that is deemed to be distant and unresponsive, or prone to favour immigrants and ethnic minorities over the white working class. There is no doubt that it is this current that many members of the political class have in the forefront of their minds when 'Englishness' is invoked.

But it is important to recognise that Englishness as racialised resentment is only one of a number of interwoven and rival strands of thought and culture. Arrayed against such attitudes are important attempts to articulate cosmopolitan and progressive expressions of politicised Englishness, and to promote radical English traditions.

Some on the centre-left have started to draw heavily upon a distinctively English sense of libertarian radicalism to express their opposition to the government's incursion on a range of civil liberties. Indeed the mythology of the 'free born' Englishmen is uniting a wide spectrum of opinion, from the liberalism of campaigner and journalist Henry Porter, through the Conservatism of MP David Davis, and the green-radicalism of George Monbiot. There has also developed an intriguing bridgehead between radical environmentalism and a conservative discourse of English exceptionalism. This is exemplified by Paul Kingsnorth's attack upon the monochrome vapidness of corporate culture, which is underpinned by a confident invocation of a 'real England' – of pubs, villages and peasants – that is being driven to the wall.¹⁷ Whether this is a phenomenon orientated to the left or right, or a point of contact between both, is interestingly ambiguous. It undoubtedly borrows from and interweaves different sorts of Anglo-focused complaint, contrasting authentic counter-cultural English authenticity to big government, corporate capital, and the character and speed of socio-cultural change.

Englishness plays important and variable roles in relation to these different strands of political expression. Its manifold variants have been overlooked by those considering 'the English question' in its constitutional guise. The key question suggested by this wider-angled approach is to consider whether we are witnessing a growth in the tendency to project socio-economic grievances and resentments through the lens of English identity. One important possibility is that the apparent growth in disenchantment with politics and the political class that has become a concern for many commentators and politicians is also connected to the resurgence of the idiom of authentic Englishness.

Together, these different layers and invocations of Englishness might usefully be regarded as the re-emergence of what cultural theorist Raymond Williams termed 'residual' elements of the contemporary 'structure of feeling'.¹⁸ He used the latter term to capture a 'mood, sensibility or atmosphere associated with a specific period or generation', a cultural paradigm which reached into the everyday experience of ordinary people and was reflected and encoded in the realms of law and policy.¹⁹ Williams argued that emergent, dominant and residual elements were in a complex inter-play within a structure of feeling that was always shifting in balance and content.²⁰ This model is helpful both in its suggestion that 'residual' elements in a culture can be re-animated in ways that become challenging for dominant norms and values, and in identifying the importance of a response from power-brokers to the 'emergent' – via strategies such as reform, incorporation or suppression. Englishness is now a presence that is simultaneously ordinary and much more visible within the textures of our daily lives, and it is prone to occasional angry eruption in our politics – as in debates over fox-hunting and civil liberties.

The second way in which current debates about Englishness need to be challenged is over the governing assumption that this identity is in a zero-sum relationship with Britishness. Many English people seem to find no difficulty in holding to both affiliations simultaneously. A key question for progressives is whether an appropriate politics of identity in response to these developments involves the abandonment of Britishness. The latter has become irredeemably tainted in some eyes by the 'official' account of it promoted by prime minister Gordon Brown: in this account, Britishness derives from the belief that a civic identity that is larger and more important than the constituent nations of the United Kingdom connects a sense of the national past to a set of shared values in the present. The lived national identities and vernaculars of

the four nations have been repeatedly airbrushed out of Brown's appeal to Britishness. In response, it has become tempting for some of his critics to counter with a patriotism focused solely upon England. But there are still merits in promoting forms of Englishness that remain loosely connected to Britishness. Such an approach still speaks to many people in England, including those who remain unmoved by, and even fearful of, some aspects of Englishness. Active support for and encouragement of citizens who wish to hold to hybrid, fluid and plural identities seems far more in keeping with the spirit of the democratic settlement for which the left is aiming than elevating one national identity above others.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

There is a reluctance within the political class as a whole to engage fully with the implications of the new Englishness, a detachment that leads to the tendency for this phenomenon to be either underestimated or over-hyped. The general reluctance of our politicians and parties to engage with the shifting moods, hopes and fears associated with changes in national identification is itself a major hindrance to the formulation of a progressive and democratic response to the challenges facing England post-devolution. Just as important as gaining an understanding of these phenomena are the issues of how and when (if at all) to intervene in relation to them. Does it make sense to act now, especially when the recession may generate real anger about disparities in public expenditure levels among the four nations? The downturn may also ripen conditions for the populist-nationalist appeals that are the speciality of the fringe right-wing parties (to both English and Anglo-British nationalisms). Or, might intervention of the wrong sort engender an increasingly insular, resentful and anti-Union consciousness among the English? This needs to be acknowledged as a genuine dilemma, with reasonable arguments in favour of both options.

In his balanced and sober analysis of the opinion surveys on the constitutional preferences of the English, in the wake of devolution, John Curtice provides some useful pointers for those wrestling with this issue. First, he argues convincingly that we should be wary of the results of polls produced by commercial organisations that occasionally report spectacular numbers in favour of a parliament for England on the basis of leadingly phrased questions.²¹ Time-series data he has compiled suggests that support for this option has fairly consistently been the

preference of just below 20 per cent of the English people in the last decade.

But he and other pollsters also report that a majority of the English public has been and still is affronted by the so-called West Lothian issue, whereby Scottish MPs can vote on English-only matters, but they and English MPs cannot vote on a large number of 'reserved' matters that are handled by the Scottish Parliament. The British Social Attitudes Survey of 2009 reports that 61 per cent of English people think that Scotland's MPs should not vote on English legislation.²² Sections of the media have railed against this anomaly, particularly on the occasions where the voting of MPs from Scotland helped overturned the preferences of English MPs – notably University top-up fees and Foundation Hospitals – which has embedded disgruntlement about this democratic inequity.

In the same period awareness has grown of the disparity between public spending per head in the four countries of the Union, an issue closely bound up with the workings of the notoriously opaque Barnett formula that has been used to allocate expenditure to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since the late 1970s. The BSA results for 2009 show that nearly a third of people in England (32 per cent) feel that Scotland gets more than its fair share of government spending, compared to 22 per cent in 2003. Tensions over spending disparities – average spending per head in Scotland was 25 per cent above that in England in 2007/08 – have been compounded by a belief that the English are subsidising Scotland's different approach to social provision such as free care for the elderly and other policies that are unavailable in England.

So there are indications that portions of the English public are disgruntled about England's deal within the Union. But these grumbles cannot be reliably adduced as indications of a popular consensus for radical constitutional change, though they do not suggest wholesale enthusiasm for the status quo either. In fact, a salutary comparison can be made between the inchoate, febrile and fragmented nature of current debate about the politics of national identity in England and that which was shaped by and reflected in the conversation that politicians and key civil society leaders promoted in Scotland in the early 1990s. There has been no equivalent broadly progressive engagement with national sentiment in England in the last decade. So far there has been no significant public demand for one. However, it is possible that this situation could change under different political conditions, which

might transform English grumbling into antipathy and full-scale resentment. A Labour government that lacked a majority of seats in England, for instance, would put the West Lothian issue centre-stage.

Given this growing perception of its indifference to English sentiments and interests, and the increasingly apparent danger that it is framed as the beneficiary of a democratic injustice, what, if anything, does Labour have in its policy armoury that it might deploy in response? Very little, would appear to be the honest answer. Gordon Brown's assertive promotion of Britishness as the 'official' identity of the citizens of the four nations appears to be premised on the expectation or hope that English self-assertion will go away. How else can we explain the absence of any mention of England in a pamphlet which the Prime Minister co-authored with Douglas Alexander MP on the importance of the Union in 2007?²³

Beyond this stance, an important fissure divides Labour's internal thinking about how to reform the governance of England. This is between those who remain convinced that devolution in the English context translates into the development of a tier of regional government – including senior figures in the Cabinet such as Ed Balls – and those who see a more full-blooded localism, and the reinvigoration of England's cities in particular, as the answer to excessive governmental centralism.

Given a considerable stimulus by devolution, the regionalist project hit a very public buffer in 2004, with a No vote in the referendum on regional government held in the North East of England. Since then, Labour has continued to locate important co-ordinating powers over economic development, planning and housing within (unelected) regional development agencies. Additionally, they have appointed regional ministers and committed to establishing regional select committees. While rarely promoted as answers to the English question, some of its thinking about how this regional tier of government might develop is informed by the lingering ambition to shape a new governance model for England. But while the government's regionalism may make sense in terms of administrative co-ordination, this technocratic approach does not align with the outlook and identities of most people. Local places, not regions, still function as more important places of identification and community for most people in England.

There are clearly some in Labour circles, above all worried MPs in the South and Midlands, who are acutely aware of the growing resonance of English symbols and identity. And a handful, including MPs

David Blunkett and Frank Field, have gone further still, articulating the case for a progressive Englishness in terms that connect them to campaigners and activists like Billy Bragg, operating on the fringes of the party system. But such voices do not represent Labour's mainstream. The abiding approach of the party to this issue is interestingly similar to that produced by the election of the SNP in Scotland. When forced to deal with the logic of its own devolution programme – that a new tier of government and new political arenas have introduced an important pluralist dynamic into British politics – Labour under Brown has managed its relations with Alex Salmond's government in a reluctant and defensive manner.

Different interwoven factors have shaped this abiding response. First, Labour in its years of office has entrenched itself within the governing mentality of the unitary state. This ethos has rubbed against a number of reforming and localising initiatives and ambitions.²⁴ Nationalism in Scotland and a growing sense of Englishness, as well as the political difficulties associated with devolution, have come to seem like a set of annoying obstacles to, and distractions from, the challenges of pragmatic and progressive governance.

Second, the historic difficulty which social democracy and other parts of the progressive political community have had in relating to forms of political identity other than class has continued to inhibit a response to the articulation of claims and perspectives rooted in other forms of belonging and identity. This has created a tendency to see Englishness only through the lenses of its most unpalatable and nativist expressions.

A third force shaping Labour's response in this area has been electoral politics. The results of the last three general elections have produced an ever sharper contrast in the territorial support of the main political parties, with Labour as the party with a strong base in Scotland and Wales as well as England, and an increasingly Anglo-focused Conservative opposition. At the 2005 general election, Scotland and Wales produced 69 Labour MPs – compared to just 4 Conservative MPs – which might help explain the government's reluctance to support policies restricting the voting rights of their Scottish and Welsh MPs. Equally it explains why the Conservatives, who have nothing to lose by the introduction of such a restriction, have been motivated to denounce the West Lothian Question as a constitutional outrage. Thus electoral politics have helped lock Labour into a defensive position on England.

The awkwardness of the government's constitutional relationship to England and its apparent fear of Englishness might appear to assist the Conservatives' position on these issues. But the English question has also posed dilemmas for the Tories over the last few years. The Conservatives have dallied since 1999 between two different positions. One of these has been the temptation to play the 'English card', in order to boost its own support in England and underline the government's vulnerability. This reflects an important shift in the nationalist sensibilities of some portions of Conservative party membership, and, even more importantly, the rise of a distinctly pro-English outlook among right-of-centre opinion more generally. Though very few Conservatives have associated themselves with the iconic policy of English nationalists – the call for a separate Parliament for England – some leading figures, including Lord Kenneth Baker and MPs Michael Forsythe and David Davis, have advocated a significant adjustment in parliamentary procedure. Different proposals to let English MPs vote on English-specific issues have sought to build into the workings of the UK-wide legislature the provision for English MPs to decide on (bits of) legislation that apply solely to England. The policy of 'English votes for English law' was included in the 2001 and 2005 Conservative election manifestos.

On the other hand, such an emphasis has generally been nested within an abidingly pro-unionist way of thinking. This recognises that turning into an English party would weaken its already enfeebled position in Scotland and Wales. And there is a danger that too enthusiastic an adoption of English grievance may produce a break from the party's historically redoubtable commitment to Unionism. It is telling that David Cameron has signalled his own support for the Union in several speeches he has delivered over the last two years. In these he indicates a rhetorical acceptance of the pluralistic logic of devolution, sharply contrasting his policies with those of the prime minister: government at the centre, Cameron repeatedly makes clear, needs to work alongside and be ready to co-operate with the devolved assemblies. Positioning himself against both Labour's intolerant centralism and the Thatcherite heritage, Cameron's rhetoric promises that the Conservatives will, if elected, govern in a way that does not result in a nationalist upsurge in Scotland and Wales. This promise may be sorely tested, however, if the Conservatives win an election in 2010 with only a handful of seats in Scotland and a large majority in England.

A rich tradition of political thinking about constitution and state

also underpins Cameron's calculations. As one recent account of this issue, which draws deeply on the heritage of Oakeshottian liberal-conservatism, puts it, the notion of developing institutional accommodations and constitutional adjustments for changing patterns of national self-identification is a foundational tradition of the British polity.²⁵ It is in this spirit that we should understand the latest iteration of Conservative policy in this area – the recommendation in 2008 by a task force headed up by Kenneth Clarke MP of a version of the 'English votes for English laws' idea. The governing ambition informing this elegantly dressed, but messy, compromise is to tidy up an anomaly that may be turning some English voters off the political system altogether.

Many Conservatives are aware that this proposal carries the same potential risks as other attempts to provide a symmetrical solution to the asymmetrical realities of devolution. It too may well fall prey to the law of unintended consequences – developing a complex and potentially cumbersome set of procedures that could end up generating greater national competitiveness within the legislature, rather than seeing off English discontent. Labour's riposte – that this would effectively create two classes of MP – carries some force, as does the worry that this apparently neat solution would, at some future point, engender intense constitutional commotion, should a UK government lack a majority of English MPs. Such objections have been rehearsed ever since this notion was first aired. Just as important, however, is whether fine-tuning parliamentary procedure in this way can really provide a durable response to the challenges associated with the emergence of Englishness.

A similar question-mark hangs over a rival proposal in this area. A small but loud chorus of opinion champions the notion that the inequities of asymmetrical devolution will only be resolved when England has its own parliament. Major problems beset this proposal. The provision of an assembly (and presumably an executive) for 85 per cent of the population of the Union is likely to produce yet another kind of imbalance. It is hard to point to any successful democratic state that gives the overwhelming majority of the population a separate parliament. Whether the Union would simply limp to an end in such a circumstance, or be re-invented as a federal state, divides those who argue for a parliament. The second of these scenarios is currently under-developed. Its credible articulation depends on the generation of a model that compensates for England's economic and population advantages, and that provides a compelling account of what kind of

civic identity and arrangement would continue to make a British state meaningful.

But as yet calls for an English parliament do not resonate very powerfully with the English. And the reasons for the lack of resonance of this plan are important. One was captured in the observation of the political scientist Richard Rose in 1982, that in constitutional terms England is a state of mind, not a state.²⁶ By this he meant that a relatively independent sense of national identity and history undoubtedly subsisted through the period of Union, but this did not issue forth into a fully-fledged demand for political-institutional recognition because English interests and needs were systematically reflected within the government of the UK as a whole. In fact, since devolution many central government departments have become even more preoccupied with English business, while the Westminster Parliament is dominated by English MPs (528 out of 654). A further key factor is that for many in England, intra-English questions, particularly the concentration of power and wealth in London and the South East, are just as salient as the issue of disparities of treatment between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

An especially important question which needs to be inserted into this debate is whether or not England is on the way to becoming a political community in its own right. A serious discussion about this would constitute a significant step forward for mainstream political thinking on these issues. So far there is no obvious consensus about, or groundswell of opinion pointing towards, an alternative set of arrangements for English government – though there are clearly signs of disgruntlement with England's lot among some groups, and this co-exists with a cultural drift towards an English sensibility and self-awareness that are more independent from the identities and institutions associated with the Union. What some regard as a situation in which the English are unfairly deprived of their own institutions, others see as a typically Anglo-British fudge that gives English people a strong enough sense of recognition and democratic involvement. Until the balance of argument shifts decisively away from this stand-off, it is hard to envisage a new nationally-orientated settlement that will command a wide consensus.

However our politicians should not be overly reassured by such an argument. Englishness may not yet be entirely politicised, but a latent potential exists for it to erupt into political life in difficult and perhaps dangerous ways. In the context of a deepening economic recession, the

now-established tendency for disaffected groups to turn to national identity in order to project displaced resentments, suggests the need for vigilance. There is a case for public action that does not follow the lines of any of the favoured constitutional 'solutions' to the English question. This could comprise a package of measures that are designed to accord a greater degree of 'recognition' and space for English cultural expressions, without undertaking a state-directed project of nation building.

Making St George's Day a bank holiday and encouraging the use of an English national anthem at sporting events would be good starting points, though for such reforms to be credible they cannot simply be imposed top-down by the state. An overhaul of the Barnett formula, deploying a more transparent measure of social need per capita, is increasingly overdue. And there is a case too for examining whether the different historical narratives that shape contemporary Englishness – radical, liberal and conservative – deserve more space in the school curriculum. We also need a package of democratic reforms that seek to dismantle the dysfunctional concentration of powers within Whitehall, a large number of quangos and currently unaccountable regional bodies.

OUT WITH THE OLD, BUT WHAT IS THE NEW?

Getting to grips with the democratic implications and future political prospects of 'the English question' necessarily involves confronting a thicket of related issues. We are – in political and policy terms – currently stuck between the waning of one constitutional order, support for which is weakening in England, and the achievement of a new democratic arrangement. This phase could last a long time.

Or, we could be propelled towards an intense phase of fevered debate by a long and deep economic recession. This may well latch onto the question of public spending disparities between the constituent nations in the context of tighter spending rounds and growing welfare budgets. Or tensions could rise from the combination of the election of a Conservative government with negligible support in Wales and Scotland, the emergence of a majority SNP administration in Scotland, and the unforeseen consequences of 'English Votes for English Laws'. The future is hard to read. What we know from the past is that single measures of constitutional reform can generate a host of other dynamics, often leading to spasms of further reforming energy.

Two specific recommendations suggest themselves. First, it would be

perilous for the political class to embark on such a process without a full engagement with and proper understanding of the febrile and fearful mood of the English. More than this, politicians need to engage with the English as citizens and identity-bearers, and not just as voters that they need to placate at election time.

The second implication is that we should consider expanding the policy menu that has grown up in response to the English question. This is not because the main proposed answers are entirely inadequate. Each has its merits and weaknesses. But none of them commands wide assent now, and none appears likely to resolve issues arising from a more restive and assertive Englishness. A wider democratic engagement with what English people want is long overdue. So is more creative thinking from policy-makers about how to provide space and recognition for the newly emerging cultures and practices of the English.

For the Labour party in particular, and centre-left more broadly, these proposals carry a quite profound intellectual as well as policy challenge. Thinking through the implications of multiple sites of governance and politics within the UK means reviewing some of its most established and unspoken assumptions. Delivering social justice through democratic control over the unitary state has been a major ambition since the party's inception. Over the last decade it has in different ways attempted to implement parts of this vision – with very mixed results. After devolution, the question of whether this remains a desirable and deliverable ambition has to be faced. Re-engaging with England could well be an important starting-point on this journey of renewal.

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NOTES

1. We are indebted to Professor Charlie Jeffrey for sharpening our awareness of the importance of this question.
2. Sceptics about the case for reform in this area include Christopher G.A. Bryant, *The Nations of Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. For arguments in favour of the latter perspective from left and right, see Billy Bragg, *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging*, Bantam Press, 2006; and Simon Heffer, *Nor Shall my Sword: the Reinvention of England*, Phoenix, 1999.

3. For a fuller discussion of this cultural trend, see Richard English, Richard Hayton and Michael Kenny, *Beyond the Constitution: Englishness in a Post-Devolved Britain*, i pp, 2008.
4. See David Marquand, *Decline of the Public*, Polity, 2004.
5. Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000*, Macmillan, 2000.
6. See especially Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
7. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Vintage, London, 1996.
8. See the reservations in Bernard Crick's discussion, 'The Four Nations: Interrelations', *Political Quarterly*, Vol 79, No 1, January-March 2008.
9. Julia Stapleton, *Political Intellectuals and Public Identities in Britain since 1850*, Manchester University Press 2001.
10. See John Curtice, *Has England Had Enough? Public Opinion and the Future of the Union?*, NatCen, 2008.
11. See also John Curtice, 'What the People Say, if Anything', in Robert Hazell (ed.), *The English Question*, Manchester University Press 2006.
12. The Facebook cause 'Make St. George's Day a Bank Holiday!!!! I'm English & Proud!!!'; available at www.facebook.com/causes.
13. See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, London 1995.
14. See the front cover of *The Spectator*, 23 April 2005. This genre is exemplified in Robin Page's *Daily Mail* blog 'The Vocal Yoke!'; available at: <http://pageblog.dailymail.co.uk/>.
15. Among numerous examples, see the front cover of *The Daily Star*, 13 February 2009.
16. The upsurge of populist accounts of 'the white working class', partly in response to the perceived success of far right parties like the BNP, has become a significant phenomenon in its own right. See for instance, Rod Liddle, 'Why would the English Working Class Vote Labour Again?', *The Spectator*, 4 February 2009; and Deborah Summers, 'White Working Class Fears Ignored over Immigration', *The Guardian*, 2 January 2009.
17. Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: the Battle Against the Bland*, Portobello Books, London, 2008.
18. We are grateful to Richenda Gambles for pointing out the pertinence of Williams's thinking for this question.
19. Gail Lewis and Janet Fink, "'All that Heaven Allows": The Worker-Citizen in the Post War Welfare State', in Gail Lewis (ed.), *Citizenship: Personal Lives and Social Policy*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2004.
20. See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1961.
21. See John Curtice, *Lessons from the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary Election*, i pp, 2008.
22. John Curtice, 'Is There an English Backlash? Reactions to Devolution', *British Social Attitudes: the 25th Report*, NatCen, 2009.

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23. Gordon Brown and Douglas Alexander, *Stronger Together: The 21st century case for Scotland and Britain*, Fabian Society, London 2007.
24. See especially the Green paper which it published, to considerable acclaim, in July 2007 – *The Governance of Britain*, available at <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7170/7170.pdf>
25. Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2007.
26. Richard Rose, *Understanding the United Kingdom*, 1982.