

'With a shrug of the shoulders': Is England becoming a nation once again?

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Introduction

I followed with interest the press coverage of Hull's celebrations of *Larkin25*, plastic toads and all. It was noticeable how London-based journalists - when they were not patronizing - tended to report the virtues of this city with incredulity.

Specifically, there was the resort to the mean trick of placing Hull's claims to attention in inverted commas –for instance '*inspiring*'.

In one article, though, I was struck by a comment of Jean Hartley's, Larkin's original publisher. 'Hull', she said of Larkin, 'had more impact on him than he had on Hull'.

I can certainly say the same thing about myself. When I was here I drifted around in that dream-like state which was once the privilege of the graduate student - before the rigours of modern academic life imposed themselves.

Hull's unpretentiousness and its self-deprecation – which for metropolitan journalists are failings –remain its attraction. Despite its prosaic reputation, Hull is a good place for dreamers. I received not only an excellent formal education at this University but also a sentimental education in the life of this city – for which I will always be grateful.

So it is indeed an honour and a privilege to come back to deliver the Norton Lecture. And it is to Phillip that I owe personal thanks. He took a big risk inviting me to co-author with him the book

Conservatives and Conservatism. And I have no doubt that it was his name - rather than mine - on that book contract which enabled me to get my first academic post 30 years ago.

What Larkin really appreciated about Hull was that nobody wanted to go there. That is no longer true, as the reputation of this University shows. However, his opinion that 'Hull's a difficult place to drop in on' still holds true.

I was supposed to come here in December for a symposium on a forthcoming book by Simon Lee and Matt Beech. Unfortunately, Hull was inaccessible by any route because of snow. I hope the *Hull Daily Mail* celebrated its 125th year with a nod to that famous headline about 'fog in the Channel':

'Snow at Brough. Britain Cut Off'

That is a very roundabout way - a Hull way, perhaps - of getting to my subject this evening: the subject known as the 'English Question'.

Parris article

The title and text for my lecture are taken from a recent article by Matthew Parris in *The Spectator*.

It is only a short 'think piece' but it disorders certain assumptions about Englishness.

In summary, here is what can only be called Parris's moment of epiphany.

He is listening to the presenter on BBC Radio 4's Today programme doing a quick round-up of the weather in that December when the world is cut off from Hull.

It is very cold all over Britain, the presenter said. Later there would be *'snow in the north of the country'*.

Parris asks himself: *'Which country?'* And the realisation dawns:

As an Englishman, and as 2010 drew to a close, I was experiencing for the first time the thought that, when directed towards a predominantly English audience, the ordinary and natural meaning of 'the country' might now be England.

Though it is said that that English nationhood is 'resurgent', he thinks something else is happening: *'Englishness isn't growing at all; it's just unmasking itself'*.

Since 1999, devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has slowly impinged on English consciousness. They only used the term 'Britain', says Parris, because they thought it pleased the Scots. *'Now we discover they've gone off the idea. Fine. So let's call it England again'*.

He accepts that this as a caricature, but the caricature - *'the collective shrug of English shoulders: very well then, "England" is palpable'*.

So then, in the break-up of Britain stakes, it isn't Scotland, Wales or even Northern Ireland which are drifting away. *'It is England'*.

Now, you may think that this sounds a bit like Willie Whitelaw's reference to Harold Wilson: going around the country *'stirring up apathy'*.

How, you may ask, can an apathetic 'shrug of the shoulders' become a stirring political act? For those who have followed the debate on Englishness over the last decade the implications of this sort of shoulder-shrugging will not be lost.

It challenges some recent academic wisdom on three different but related matters.

Three matters

The first is the matter of **identity**. Recently, I was reviewing a book for *Parliamentary Affairs* where the authors claim that:

‘The Scots, the Welsh, and the Northern Irish can and do debate national identity at length and with arms. The English can mount the occasional sortie but, like sex and religion, it is not deemed a suitable dinner table topic’.

It has always seemed to me that the English are never more English than when either they self-consciously ignore nationality or when think they *aren’t* talking about themselves.

Roy Hattersley – English patriot, professional Yorkshireman and graduate of this parish - captures this temperament in his collection *In Search of England*. Like Orwell, he is proud to be English but sees no point in making a fuss about it. *‘Indeed’*, he says, *‘not making a fuss about being English seems to me an essential ingredient of Englishness’*.

[As an aside, Hattersley’s blend of Yorkshire loyalty and English identity may have sociological substance. Julian Baggini distilled what he calls the ‘English philosophy’ after living in England’s *Everytown* - which turns out to be Rotherham. Its representativeness has not gone unchallenged. The radio presenter and professional Northerner, Stuart Maconie, described Rotherham in *Pies and Prejudice* as resembling a forgotten chemical town in the former Soviet Union.]

This is – if you like – traditional shoulder-shrugging: *of course* our identity is English. That sort of cultural insouciance implies that persuading English people to think nationalistically means persuading them to think very *differently* about themselves and about their country. That, in so many words, is the theme of Krishan Kumar's influential *The Making of English National Identity*.

Parris suggests that a change is taking place - shoulder-shrugging means something rather different now. It is a gesture signaling that the English *are* beginning to think differently about themselves and their country: to use Moreno scaling, more English *than* British, even English *not* British.

In other words, who needs 'arms' when you have 'shoulders'?

And it is British-ness which is being shrugged off. As the English nationalist blogger Gareth Young put it, supporting Parris - *England is the country, and the country is England*.

The second is the matter of **disposition**.

The work of the social psychologist, Susan Condor, and her colleagues has been influential in defining what might be called the English disposition.

Condor's extensive interviews discovered something interesting about English responses. Rather than presupposing an '*other*' against which to define itself, Englishness tends to function as its

own 'other', constructed *not* in relation to the other UK nations, but *self-referentially*. This operates through contrasts with:

- the English past
- different places (North vs. South, urban vs. rural locations),
- different social classes
- different political persuasions.

By and large, then, Condor's work shows that the English do *not* lack a sense of national identity. Nor do they fail to recognize how devolution has changed the United Kingdom. It just doesn't affect significantly their disposition towards the devolved territories. Here is yet another example of benign shoulder-shrugging. The Scots, the Welsh and the Ulsters now have some self-government? – well, good luck to them.

Parris's argument puts both this self-referential disposition and this acquiescent mood into a different perspective. He describes an English disposition which is self-regarding in a different manner - the other parts of the United Kingdom are fading from consciousness and perhaps even from conscience. This has happened before, of course.

Between the wars, the historian G M Young wrote that it was difficult for his generation, which rarely thought of Ireland at all, to imagine the fervour of the previous generation that appeared to think of nothing else. The amnesia which applied to Ireland after 1922 could be applied to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland after 1999.

This corresponds with the argument found in two recent books edited by Mark Perryman, also a graduate of this University. For Perryman and others, the national disposition *has* changed.

England is already *'after Britain'*.

Nationalism, as Tom Nairn might say, has finally caught up with the English.

The third is the matter of **political imagination**.

The political scientist Richard Rose once proposed that England is a state of mind but not a state.

Though he could write of politics *in* England, the politics *of* England were *British*.

Nevertheless, because of the sheer size and predominance of England in the United Kingdom, political life could be led as if only England existed.

It can be argued that devolution impinges only marginally here. The anomalies of devolution may appear minor in the wider scheme of (mainly English) matters. To give one – though major – example, it is striking that when you read the autobiographies and diaries of New Labour figures, devolution is hardly mentioned at all.

Perhaps Robert Hazell made the classic statement about the challenge of devolution to English political imagination. The English Question, he argued, *'is not an exam question which the English are required to answer'*. It can remain unresolved *'for as long as the English want'*.

Here is another sort of shoulder-shrug – let's not think about it. Answering the question isn't pressing. Importantly for politicians, the touted English backlash never seems to happen.

Again, Parris challenges that view. The backlash is another shrugging affair and *not* an assertive demonstration but. It entails a very English form of British dissolution – not with a bang but a whimper.

In this case: *English are the politics, and the politics are English*.

In summary, then, Parris implies an inversion of effect – English insouciance, once sustaining of the United Kingdom, has become subversive of it.

Politics of Englishness

As yet, it is important to stress, this is a *mood* and not a *movement*.

But – as Parris intimates – perhaps there is a shift taking place from mood to movement. Perhaps this is that Chestertonian moment - when the people of England finally speak, of freedom this time and not of ale.

What has been said so far is rather negative – to use an Americanism, it is a bit like the politics of ‘whatever’.

In *News from Nowhere* William Morris made the ironic comment:

‘I must now shock you by telling you that we have no longer anything which you, a native of another planet, would call a government.’

The English *‘are very well off as to politics, - because we have none’*.

For some this is no longer an English utopia. It is an English dystopia. The call to action is to politicize England and to give it a government. What are the positive arguments which might impart movement to this mood?

The first is **institutional**.

Simon Lee has argued that devolution has created *‘deficits in citizenship rights, democratic accountability and the denial of the expression of England’s national identity as a distinct political community’*.

The political case for England, then, must involve *'the self-determination to vote on policies and issues that affect it alone that devolution has extended to the other constituent nations of the United Kingdom'*.

The language here carefully avoids nationalist rhetoric. Others, however, have identified a conspiracy to keep the 'English question' out of political debate. And it is claimed that there are two consequences.

Not only are the English *as a people* rendered invisible.

But England *as a place* is also erased – spoken of as 'regions' without the integrity or dignity of nationhood.

As Jim Bulpitt observed a generation ago, England was *never* the centre of the United Kingdom. British governments, he argued, *'attempted to relate to (or distance itself from) all parts of the country in a similar fashion'*. For central government *'if not for the English, England was part of the periphery'*.

For nationalists, of course, England should be at the centre and the *British* title is the problem.

The second is **economic**.

The English need to assert themselves – not only for reasons of patriotic dignity but also for material reasons. When it comes to public spending, devolution shows how England's lack of political identity is a handicap. Shoulder-shrugging is no longer an option.

Devolution means *subsidized* self-determination. The Scots, the Welsh and the Irish get the self-determination and the English do the subsidizing. The University tuition issue, of course, has put

this firmly in the public's mind. As that fount of wisdom, the *Cumbria News and Star*, put it a few years ago: 'Scotland the free, England the fee'.

Politically and economically, the imperative seems clear. England needs a distinct – or even separate – political voice to articulate and to protect its interests.

As Chris Bryant – the academic, not the politician – has argued:

'The many politicians who acknowledge the anomalies and inequities attached to England's current place in the union but who prefer not to address them until the non-existent easy solution presents itself risk an eventual English backlash'.

Yet, as we have noted, one should be cautious about 'backlashes'. It was HG Wells who said that: *'In England we have come to rely upon a comfortable time-lag of a century intervening between the perception that something ought to be done and a serious attempt to do it'*. And this could be true in this case as well.

A nation once again?

A prescient Leader in *The Observer* in 2006 observed that if *'the English are told often enough they should feel aggrieved at the results of devolution, they'll start to believe it'*. More now do believe it than previously. A *Sunday Telegraph* poll that same year found that:

- 59 per cent of English respondents approved of Scottish independence;
- 68 per cent favoured an English Parliament;
- 60 per cent thought that levels of public expenditure in England were unfair.

Such figures can be misleading, however. A useful rule of political thumb it is that it is unwise to read politics through newspaper headlines. Time-series academic studies – such as the British Social Attitude Survey – show that support for an English Parliament, for example, has risen much less dramatically, growing from 18 per cent in 1999 to 29 per cent in 2009.

English nationalists, though, expect subterranean changes in mood – those which Parris writes about - to have a decisive impact at some stage on constitutional politics.

Therefore, one can argue that if the higher figures represent *mood*, the lower figures represent potential *movement*. For now the two are disconnected, with no major party willing to bridge the gap.

And it is this disconnection which invites caution about drawing hasty conclusions about the state of Englishness. Here are a few counter-indications.

First, the Conservative Party would appear most likely to put the mood on the political agenda.

In his history of the Conservatives, Lord Blake asked: why should a party overwhelmingly English in its support and outlook defend the Union so vigorously?

Yet it continues to do so. Indeed, in the course of the last decade the party has diluted its position on English distinctiveness.

- Under William Hague's leadership there was initial flirtation with an English Parliament.
- The policy for two General Elections then became English Votes for English Laws.
- In 2008, the Conservative Task Force on the Constitution proposed that bills certified as 'English' should be subject to the vote of English MPs at committee and report stages.

The final say would remain with the whole House which blogger Gareth Young dismissed as *'English pauses on English clauses'*.

- The Conservative-dominated Coalition has agreed to set up yet another Commission to examine the West Lothian Question

Anthony Barnett wrote that the desire to preserve the Union was an important motive for David Cameron's offer of a coalition to the Liberal Democrats. Not the only reason, certainly, but an indicative one.

And Cameron was sincere when he said, on walking into Downing Street as Prime Minister, that he was deeply conscious of being responsible for the *'future of our United Kingdom'*.

He went on: *'When I say I am prime minister of the United Kingdom, I really mean it. England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland – we're weaker apart, stronger together, so together is the way we must always stay'*

Second, it is worth noting here another of Susan Condor's conclusions.

She discovered no deep sense amongst her respondents that England is being hard done by. On the contrary, they were disposed to accept devolution because they thought it *'normatively incumbent upon themselves, as members of the English majority, to do so'*.

This suggests a rather different mood from the one Parris identified. And insofar as this norm is fairly representative – and it still seems to be – it is a condition which is not very conducive to political nationalism. It may change in the future, of course, but for now it holds true.

Third, it is also important to consider here the work of John Curtice. He has tracked consistently over the last decade the data on English identity, disposition and political preferences. Here in summary are the main points.

- There is little sign that English support for the United Kingdom has eroded following devolution. They haven't shrugged off the British state.
- Most English people prefer England to be governed by Westminster – overwhelmingly so if one adds to 'no change' some variant of English votes on English laws.
- The majority (as Condor also argues) accept that other parts of the United Kingdom should have some form of self-governance
- English self-identification has increased but this does not mean an increase in English nationalism. Curtice discovered no inexorable trend here either. British identity, it seems, is not being shrugged off lightly either.

Conclusion

What conclusions may be drawn?

We can say that the English Question is comprised of different questions, social, cultural and political. Its current expression has a particular context: the new complexity of United Kingdom governance and the uncertainty of how England fits into it.

Parris's blithe shoulder shrugging exists alongside a very different state of anxiety we find in others about the state of the (English) nation. It can be found on the Left – for example, Paul Kingsnorth and Billy Bragg - as well as on the Right – for example, Simon Heffer and Roger Scruton.

However, the anxious spirit and the blithe spirit are also disconnected.

In a recent article Krishan Kumar wrote that for England '*the option of a strong political nationalism is neither a realistic nor a sensible one. It goes against the grain of its whole history – its whole temperament, we may say*'.

That may remain the case. Of course, times do change.

What we can say is this.

If the English Question '*is not an exam question*' we can no longer be certain of the answer.

Arthur Aughey