

The University of Edinburgh
Twenty-fifth John P. Mackintosh Memorial Lecture
Tuesday 02 October 2007 The Playfair Library, Old College, 5.15pm

THE FOUR NATIONS: INTERRELATIONS

Professor Sir Bernard Crick

Principal,

I am honoured and peculiarly delighted to give at last this lecture which just might have gained John's mercurial attention and, until I come to very end, agreement. I had already read his masterly book, combining the disciplines of History and Politics, *The British Cabinet*, before I first met him following his temporary defeat in the first General Election of 1974. He regained his seat later that year. But in the interregnum he had negotiated a research grant from the then SSRC for a study of the late nineteenth century Parliament. And he was typically very indignant when SSRC said they could not possibly give a grant to a sitting MP. How could this be done to him! But a canny Welsh lady at SSRC, who knew us both too well, suggested to me that I might like the grant at Sheffield University and appoint the Mackintosh as an Honorary Research Associate - and to let him get on with it. When I went to Birkbeck he soon became my honorary Visiting Professor and taught a seminar on parliament. The students were delighted when he couldn't get away from the House, for then we bundled them into two taxis to join him while he waited to vote, usually loyally.

Then for three years until his tragically early death in 1978 he joined me as joint editor of the *Political Quarterly*. We were together against the old Left, the Hard Left, and for Europe. John converted me to the cause of Scottish devolution, although in my writing a pamphlet at that time with a young Tribune group MP, David Blunkett, and in ghosting some speeches for Neil Kinnock, they each would each firmly delete devolution. On John's tragically early death I became his literary executor, commissioning the publication of two volumes of his essays, one edited by the late Henry Drucker and the other by David Marquand, all of which drew me to visit and finally settle in Scotland. But that's not a story for young ears.

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SO MUCH has been said about the different cultures of the four nations, and always more to be said about how these cultures change, but also something to be said about their interrelations. Any approach to interrelations must begin with history before turning to politics, for so much politics is an evoked memory of past history, true and false, researched or imagined. Once upon a time, indeed almost yesterday, histories of each of the four historic nations of the British Isles could be written with only glancing reference to the others, some of those glancings are piercingly hostile, others are loftily disdainful. Fair enough that the great Oxford History of England was a history of England from earliest times, but it now seems more than a little bit off for A.J.P. Taylor to have said in the Preface to his *English History: 1914-1945* volume: "the use of 'England' except for a geographic area brings protests from the Scotch", as he provocatively called the Scots. "They seek to impose 'Britain'," he said, "the name of a Roman province that perished in the Fifth century." He proposed to stick to English history as his assignment. That Scotland had a different established church, etc... was "none... of my concern". So it was apparently of no concern to him that the Scottish Church question that was the trigger to the English Civil War, or as modern historians now say, "the civil wars in three kingdoms".

But at least AJP Taylor was teasing, being deliberately provocative or malicious, not ignorant. The case of another Oxford professor is somewhat different, someone who specialised in sounding authoritative in an irritatingly Oxford way. In 1982, Lord Blake, no less, edited an up-market coffee-table book, full of lovely pictures and distilled prose, called *The English World: History, Character and People*. In his Introduction he pontificated:

England's coastline has helped to shape both the history of the English nation and the psychology of the English character. The long centuries

during which the land was free from invaders meant that there could be a continuity of tradition impossible on the war-torn continent. Some characteristics on which both natives and visitors have tended to agree have to do with national psychology: egoism, self-confidence, intolerance of outsiders, ostentatious wealth, social mobility, love of comfort, and a strong belief in private property. We come to the cliché that Britain is an island, a fact that has been subtly decisive in so many aspects of her history.

Notice that as Lord Blake rolled on he suddenly became aware that "England's" coastline has this slight hiatus of the Welsh and Scottish borders. So while his rhetoric cries out to quote Shakespeare's John of Gaunt, "England, bound in with the triumphant sea", yet even though he was an English historian and not a geographer, yet on this sad point of fact he has to concede, as a scholar, in the last line I quoted, that "*Britain* is an island". And having gone so far he might have noted that Scottish historians would not so easily accept or recognise the contrast between "a continuity of tradition" of a mythically peaceful isle of Albion and the "war-torn continent". The Scottish 17th and early 18th centuries were either war torn or ever fearful of a return of war. And as for England not suffering invasion for long centuries, somehow the victorious Scottish army of the Covenant occupying Newcastle in 1640 did not count, nor the Dutch fleet and army of 1688. Oh, and of course this common English confusion of English with British in this myth of the peaceable kingdom must be forgotten - repressed not even oppressed for its own good.

REVISIONIST HISTORY

Now there is a belief, no older than the mid-eighteenth century, that every nation must constitute a state, or that multinational states are inherently unstable. Nationalist histories supported this view. In the nineteenth century this was thought to be the main purpose of professional history. But there has been a remarkable recent change in the way most historians have come to look at the relations between the four nations, looking at interrelations as well as conceptual or political separations. This actually began in the late 1950s in the very hotbed of nationalist history, the Republic of Ireland, where history had previously been held to have no other serious subject matter than, in Parnell's famous teleological phrase, "the march of a nation". But that march could go in unexpected directions. Eamon Devalera had famously believed in the days of struggle that the future Irish republic would be devoutly Catholic, entirely Irish-speaking, a peasant, agrarian culture remote from the industrial and capitalist world. So the uproar was considerable when historians, first at Trinity College, not surprisingly, but then at UCD, the national university, began to assert that the Easter rising, the civil war and independence could only be properly understood in the context of British imperial history; and that the great events were contingent, could have been otherwise, not a necessary unfolding of destiny. This revisionism was reviled by nationalist intellectuals but it gradually won the argument, not just in academic history but in the writing, authorisation and teaching of history textbooks in schools.

A similar change took place, if I may generalise widely but not too wildly, in the academic writing of Scottish, Welsh and lastly even in English history. But it was the Irish historians who showed that you could be a good nationalist without being a bad historian. And it was a New Zealander who first attacked the Anglocentric dominance of English historians. In 1975 John Pocock wrote a truly seminal article, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject" (1975)¹. And the first fulfilment of that plea (and in many ways still the best) was to come in 1989 with Hugh Kearney's *The*

¹ J.G.A. Pocock, "British History: a Plea for a New Subject", *Journal of Modern History* 47, No 4 (1975).

British Isles: A History of Four Nations.² Both stressed interconnections. If there was a fault in Pocock it was that his thesis fitted high politics best, the two and a half centuries in which the dominant concern of English high politics was that of holding the United Kingdom together. It does not fit social history so well, what we used to call the history of the common people. Under different systems of land tenure the Irish peasant was not the English agricultural labourer and different parts of Scotland were different again. British history, like Britishness as a concept or belief, is an overall, umbrella category, mainly political and legal, within which national cultures not merely coexist but influence each other.

To see Britishness thus is to take issue with the main thesis of Linda Colley's otherwise vastly suggestive book, *Britons: the Forging of the Nation, 1707-1837*.³ She brilliantly uncovered and portrayed the Hanoverian state cult and, as it were, hearts and minds campaign to persuade that "We are all Britons, no longer Scots and English". But I don't believe that it diminished Scottish national consciousness, rather it created a sense of dual identity. And Colley had to exclude Ireland from her narrative to make her claim, although it was the crucial part of the British political agenda for three centuries. Some Scottish aristocrats and placemen did indeed see themselves as British and some happily or lazily called the United Kingdom "England". But the common people in both countries were largely untouched, remaining stubbornly and noticeably Scots and English. I know of no folk songs that invoked "Britons" and "Britannia"; they are all "old England" or "auld Scotland". Don't give me "Rule Britannia", that was a government sponsored, authored theatre song not a folk song. And those London journalists who think Britishness should override national identities should complain to FIFA that the United Kingdom alone among all other states is allowed to field four different football teams.

NATIONALISM NOT NECESSARILY SEPARATIST

Coltman was courted by Blair in Downing Street seminars. Her Britishness thesis was used as an argument against nationalism. But there is Nationalism and nationalism. Year in and year out I have struggled unsuccessfully to impress on sub-editors the use of an upper case capitalisation for separatist Nationalism and a lower case for cultural nationalism, or that strong national consciousness that is not necessarily separatist. Gordon Brown in the 2001 general election attacked fiercely, as he said, "nationalists" in the name of the advantages of the Union. I was

² Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: a History of Four Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ Linda Colley, *Britons: the Forging of the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University, London: 1992).

pompously moved to write to him to suggest that he either gave the SNP its real name or firmly polemicised against "*separatist* nationalists". For I humbly pointed out that, to my English and immigrant eyes, nearly all Scots were nationalists, in the sense of having a strong feeling of national identity: the majority were not separatists. I suggested that attacking nationalism as such, lumping separatism and patriotism together, could cause offence as well as confusion and drive some cultural nationalists into separatist politics.

From intellectual history comes a broad point that effects all our perceptions but often gets forgotten by politicians, indeed by most of us. Nationalism and romanticism arose hand in glove. But once we can escape from the conceptual blinker of romanticism, that local sentiments of the heart must always override the general reasoning of humanity (as exemplified in the Scottish enlightenment), we can see that peoples' calculation of their interests and of common interests can be as important as their perceptions of national differences and divergences. For example, surveys tell us that about a quarter of those who vote nationalist in Northern Ireland say they favour the preservation of the Union! They may favour, in principle, the unity of Ireland, if that is only question asked; but they sensibly want to know what is in the package for themselves and their families: how will it affect their day to day interests - welfare, unemployment, schools, health benefits, employment rights etc. This is not contemptible, except to an ultra-nationalist or passionate romantic. Interest, or the theory of utilitarianism, is not to be scorned or ignored. I suspect it figured largely in 1706 and 1707. Robert Burns's famous "bought and sold by English gold" was splendid populist rant, foolishly used by nationalist historians as if evidence; most of the commissioners on both sides were bargaining from interest expressed in alternative political compromises, above all how to ensure peace and, through commerce, prosperity. The Lowland Scots struck a not at all contemptible bargain, especially as Scots law remained and there followed the establishment and entrenchment of the real national and popular institution of the day, the Kirk, the Church of Scotland itself and the disestablishment of the

Anglican bishops. Again, one does not have to be a bad historian to be a good nationalist.

So the widely read Gordon Brown should have known better than the London media in attacking nationalism undefined and unqualified. London journalists, with an ignorance that is often wilful, interpret the strong national feeling of Scots as necessarily on a primrose path to separatism (although a few of the journalists favour that path themselves, for somewhat different reasons). I'm puzzled why they don't see Welsh nationalism in this light. Perhaps they don't take the Welsh as seriously.⁴ Publicists should at least know, as the First Minister well knows, that today there is nowhere near a majority for independence, and that even a substantial number of SNP voters favour retaining the union. There are, after all, several other reasons why people might vote SNP. That's too delicate a matter for me to comment on as still a member of the Labour Party still—very still at the moment. And back in the 1970s there were other powerful reasons, besides nationalism, for supporting devolution. John Mackintosh's powerful polemics in favour of devolution were based on democratic accountability. Scotland to a remarkable extent, he would remind, already had a devolved administration, but undemocratic and unaccountable. It was a strong argument and could sound anti-nationalist, especially in a once well known debate with Stephen Maxwell then of the SNP and also firmly against the EU. But it only sounded anti-nationalist if one drew no distinction between nationalist separatism and national consciousness. John himself, after all, was so very Scottish. English publicists whom he mauled in debate would stereotypically call him "the cocky Scot" or "the stroppy Jock", insults he and his constituents welcomed and treasured. His style and range of references in his lectures actually made English students in the Politics Department somewhat aware that they were in a different country (as was not always the case at that time in the History Department).

⁴ London leader writers and columnists may not be sensitive enough to realise that Plaid Cymru are, at heart, more dedicated to cultural nationalism than to an independence? For independence that would leave them stuck with a Welsh majority of non-Welsh speakers who might not respect the language concessions that came from Westminster to buy off separatism. Remember that Neil Kinnock broke ranks to campaign against devolution in 1997 with the terse cry, "You all know what devolution means, don't you? 'Jobs for the boyos'!"

When I joined in the devolution or home rule debate after the defeat of the first referendum I was amazed at the common platform rhetoric "Without our own parliament, we are losing our identity". I was amazed because those orators had all too obviously not lost their remarkably strong Scottish identity, even after two and half centuries wear and tear. Perhaps political institutions were not as important in shaping or maintaining national cultures as most students of politics had believed. Perhaps that democratic deficit was as important as national sentiment.

But I did not need to be embarrassed about deflating this line of argument after reading Lindsay Paterson's *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland*⁵, for there the historical and sociological evidence was plainly stated that the variant cultures of Scottishness had been remarkably resilient and independent of political institutions. He himself favoured home rule both for reasons of democracy and popular sentiment (why not call it national sentiment?). The watchword of the Constitutional Convention became "we want democracy in a Scottish way" not "Give us our own Westminster", like some post-war colony liberated or abandoned. And that is what David Miller and I tried to do in our dull but influential pamphlet about parliamentary procedure, *To Make the Parliament of Scotland a Model for Democracy*.

Now one must notice that the SNP itself, since its stormy days in the late 1970s, has, very much due to Alex Salmond's clarity and tenacity (from the time when he was nearly thrown out of the party for being both too Left wing and pro-Europe), began to move from rhetoric of "separation" to the more relative term of "independence". The forceful, wily erratic Jim Sillars was to coin the *sloaghan* "Independence in Europe". The old guard under Gordon Wilson had wished to be free of the EU as well as the UK. To make a hurtful analogy, they were somewhat of a UKIP mentality. I remember Jim Sillars arguing fiercely for independence and yet reminding his audience at an SNP fringe meeting in Ayr that there were, however, difficulties to be faced. There were formidable economic and social entanglements with south of the border: pensions, family commitments, investments and

employment in UK or international companies. All these entanglements must, he roared, be resolutely and realistically faced up to. But he never said how. At the time I did not dare ask Neal McCormick and Owen Dudley Edwards if this was a disguised argument for federalism.

ENTANGLEMENTS AND INTERRELATIONS

Such entanglements or interrelations can be, on the whole, positive for most people and only negative for separatist nationalists. And although I am an old Labour man, indeed a wounded and mournful democratic socialist survivor, I usually follow a conservative, Burkean or Oakeshottian reading of history: that our past history shapes both perceptions and behaviour more than we often recognise and more strongly than abstract principles and pure reason. For instance I have tried to defuse some of the present worries about recent immigration by reminding anyone who will listen we have been a multi-national state for just over three hundred years and a multi-cultural one quite clearly for about two hundred years. Henry Coburn in his *Memorials* saw the new railway as cementing the Union but draining high talent from Edinburgh. But then in the 1920 and 1930s came accelerated internal migration: workers moved from the shipyards of the Clyde to the new motor factories of Birmingham, Luton and Dagenham.

Certainly there are new problems arising from post-war and more recent immigration, but in historical perspective, no sudden crisis of multiculturalism. For we have been here before. The worries and venomous reactions to Irish and Jewish immigration in the 19th century and the 1900s were remarkably similar to those of the last fifty years; racial, religious and class prejudice abounded transcending simple xenophobia. Britain would lose its identity! Britain did not, nor did those two immigrant communities. Sections of the press today and most politicians want children to learn more about our history, but in these important respects seem to have little real knowledge of it themselves. Too often they favour a mythical history about a socially homogenous and consensual past, with only occasional references to

self-contained, self-service national compartments. That Irish and Jews are now integrated and British enough without losing a strong cultural identity is seldom remarked in debates about Islam in Britain, neither by old Brits nor by the spokesmen of the new Brits.

Even national differences between states in these islands do not always separate the same sort of people. Consider what sociologists call measures of social distance. For instance it is clear that middle class Irish in the Republic find it far easier to get on with the same sort of people in mainland Britain than they do anyone in the North, whether Protestants or even fellow Catholic. Family visits are from north to south, very rarely the other way round; and visits across the channel are easy and at ease. To a great extent this lack of social distance is reciprocated, even in high positions. There was that extraordinary few months when Conor Cruise O'Brien, a former Irish minister - and much else indeed, was made editor of the troubled *Observer*. He was hyperactive, writing signed pieces himself in almost every section of the paper but hopeless at team work, thus a very bad editor. He was dismissed. But no one had objected to an Irishman being appointed to a British newspaper of - back then - some influence and no one cried, "Paddy go home". It was strictly *ad hominem*. "The Cruiser" was too erratic.

IDENTITY CRISIS?

Indeed I think we wear our national identities more lightly than many editors and publicists suppose. The surveys and analysis of Frank Bechhover and David McCrone, here at hand, have shown this. If asked to choose one identity, Scots overwhelmingly go for Scottish not British; whereas English respondents are much more divided between English and British. But if survey questions offer dual identities, unsurprisingly most Scots will go for Scottish and British. And the correlation between intensity of Scottishness expressed and political allegiance is relatively weak. Indeed Bechhover and McCrone at the beginning of a recent excellent summary article in *The Political Quarterly* sound sceptical about the reality of "the identity crisis" - the "wealth of books and articles; discussions and

programmes on the presumed 'death of Britishness"', the topical "stuff of British politics and the media", at least partly fuelled, they say, "by recent government attempts to foreground Britishness." Let me quote from their tempered conclusion:

Paradoxical as it seems, the Conservatives, the traditional party of the Union, may be wise not to appeal to a sense of Britishness in Scotland because, while our data show clearly that people in Scotland are not rejecting Britishness, there is a problem confronting those who wish to mobilise this. ... [Our] work shows that politicians cannot assume that, if they wish to appeal to Britishness, it means the same thing in England as in Scotland, or to different groups in either country. Further Englishness, Scottishness and Britishness nowadays may be more cultural than political.⁶

In England, I believe, Britishness carries much of the baggage of cultural Englishness which only now is becoming sensibly discussed and rescued - together with the cross of St George - from right wing extremists. But in Scotland Britishness, I suggest, has a far narrower if strong political sense of recent common history, parliamentary government, constitutional law and the crown as an abstract symbol of unity.

I wonder if Alex Salmond is familiar with Bechofer and McCrone's work or does it simply reinforce his own good sense of political reality? In the recent election campaign he said something very important but so puzzling to the media in its basic simplicity that it was largely ignored. He said: "Independence is a political not a social matter." Indeed a political matter, if the electorate want it ultimately they should have it and can take it politically. Look back to the Declaration of Right.⁷ But "not a social matter?" Enigmatic, but I think that was meant to reassure voters that independence would not distance families and friends from each other north or south of the border, nor privilege employment for real or true Scots, still less disenfranchise immigrants (whom Scotland badly needs), even English immigrants. Any idea in SNP thinking of an ethnic test for Scottish citizenship was long ago abandoned - well, long enough ago. "Independence" is, indeed, compared to "separation" a relative term both economically and socially.

⁶ Bechhofer and McCrone, "Being British: A Crisis of Identity?" *Political Quarterly*, No 2, 2007.

⁷ Reprinted with commentaries in Owen Dudley Edwards, ed., *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, Polygon, Edinburgh 1989. John Mackintosh's widow, Dr Una Maclean, was one of the committee and signators.

BROWN'S BRITISHNESS

This makes, I think, Gordon Brown's banging on about Britishness both mistaken and irrelevant. In his recent speech to the TUC he used the term, according to the *Guardian*, 34 times and in his recent speech to the Labour Party conference the BBC counted about 80 strikes -- not always to define it, of course, but "our British" attached to this and that almost promiscuously (including "British jobs for British workers").

As I have already said, I think this a profoundly mistaken tactic if it is aimed at the SNP. But the trouble is that he really does seem to believe that unity of the United Kingdom is in danger if there is not a strong and common sense of Britishness. Listen to the mission statement or *slogan* he had drafted for a conference hosted by HM Treasury back in November 2005:

How 'British' do we feel? What do we mean by 'Britishness'? These questions are increasingly important in defining a shared purpose across all of our society. The strength of our communities, the way we understand diversity, the vigour of our public services and our commercial competitiveness all rest on a sense of what 'Britishness' is and how it sets shared goals.

So Britishness must express "a shared purpose" and "shared goals". Such language is a pale rhetorical echo of the old destructive nationalism of central Europe and the Balkans. Is this really how states hold together, especially in the modern world of, whether we like it or not, a global economy and of all notions of national sovereignty needing to be so qualified as to be almost useless in understanding actual politics⁸? This idea of national purpose is what Goethe called "a blue rose". And the search for it has proved damaging already as well as frustrating. Both Thatcher and Blair openly spoke of restoring our sense of national importance, a hangover from the days of Empire and the Second World War - which, of course, we won, with a little help

⁸ See "The Sovereignty of Parliament and the Irish Question" and "On Devolution, Decentralism and the Constitution" in my *Political Thoughts and Polemics* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

from the USA and the USSR. And this search has meant the American alliance with too few questions asked or reservations made.

Do we need a heightened sense of Britishness and clear national purpose to hold us together? Perhaps we just need good government and social justice. And national leaders should be careful when they invoke "our common values".

In July 2004 Brown gave the British Council Annual lecture on Britishness and invoked *values*, our British values:

The values and qualities I describe are of course to be found in many other cultures and countries. But when taken together, and as they shape the institutions of our country these values and qualities - being creative, adaptable and outward looking, our belief in liberty, duty and fair play - add up to a distinctive Britishness that has been manifest throughout our history, and shaped it ⁹

"Liberty, duty and fair play" - well some Scots are beginning to play cricket, of a kind. I think he plants both feet firmly in mid-air. Worse, when he gives specific historical examples, they are all - yes all -- taken from English history -- as Simon Lee showed with cruel dispassion a year ago in the *Political Quarterly*.¹⁰ Brown clearly wants us to believe that a heightened Britishness is *necessary* to hold the Union together rather than simply a rational calculation of mutual interest and advantage, as Adam Smith would have seen it, or as, David Hume would have it, tradition and habit. So he attacks the SNP in Scotland with the wrong weapon. He plays into their hands by confusing nationalism as tradition and national consciousness with nationalism as separatism. If there is a threat to the Union, I agree with Neal Ascherson, it is less likely to come directly from the Scottish electorate than from English insensitivity or even provocation (if the Conservatives got back in).¹¹

Two of Brown's colleagues put the matter better than he in a recent Fabian pamphlet neatly called *A Common Place*. Said Ruth Kelly and Liam Byrne: "Britishness is

⁹ Speech of 8 July 2004 on "Britishness", the British Council Annual Lecture. See also his speech of 14 January 2006 to the Fabian Society's Conference on The Future of Britishness.

¹⁰ Simon Lee, "Gordon Brown and the 'British Way'," *Political Quarterly*, July-September 2006.

like an umbrella under which different identities can shelter."¹² That is a good metaphor. But Brown speaks as if his British broly can only shelter one identity. He surely doesn't really believe that? He almost denies himself. Even politicians should say what they really believe, if they are to be truly respected and trusted.

Well, I hope that all this has all been very interesting, but you may well ask, where the hell do I stand? I stand in a rather unusual position which will at least make my conclusion a novel bathos. Let me return to Salmond's remark about independence being a political and not a social matter. Some years ago I was waiting in a corridor of the House of Commons when he happened to come by. He asked me in good humour whether I would return to England when Scotland got its independence. I replied that I would *probably* have voted against independence in the final referendum, but would then want to be near the head of the queue in Glasgow to get a Scottish passport. He expressed pleasure and surprise. Well, I said, "I really don't believe that independence can bring all the good some hope for nor all the troubles others fear". He laughed. I may be imagining but it sounded to me more like a laugh of recognition than a mocking laugh.

Interrelations! ?

¹¹ Neal Ascherson, "Scotophobia" an Orwell Memorial Lecture delivered at Birkbeck College, 13 February 2007.

¹² Ruth Kelly and Liam Byrne, *A Common Place*, Fabian Society 2007.