

The patriot's game

Mark Perryman

The English left needs a model of civic nationalism if
England is to have a progressive future.

Two thousand years this little tiny fucking island has been raped and pillaged by people who have come here and wanted a piece of it. Two fucking world wars men have laid down their lives for this. And for what? So we can stick our fucking flag in the ground and say yes this is England and this is England and this is England. And for what? What for? So we can just open the fucking floodgates and let them all come in. Yes come on, come in, get off your ship, did you have a safe journey? Was it hard? Here's a corner, why don't you build yourself a shop.

Combo's speech, *This is England*¹

In Scotland and Wales there are no parties of any significance offering an extreme right-wing version of Welsh or Scottish nationalism. But the anxieties of English nationalism have in recent years tended to focus on support for the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the far right British National Party (BNP). In the 2009 European elections, all but one of the 12 UKIP MEPs that were elected represented English constituencies (the solitary exception being John Bufton, who became the first UKIP MEP in Wales, with 12.8 per cent of the vote). The two BNP MEPs were both elected in English constituencies; and in the 2008 local elections all but 28 of the wards contested by the BNP were in England (their average poll was 13.9 per cent). In Rotherham BNP support soared to 28 per cent, in Stoke-on-Trent it was 27 per cent. In the 1930s Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists failed to win a single council or parliamentary seat, and in the 1970s the National Front also failed to have a single councillor elected. But by February 2009 the BNP had

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more than 50 councillors, as well as a member on the Greater London Authority. In the June 2009 County Council elections - largely overshadowed by the wins in the European election - three BNP county councillors were elected.²

If the BNP's 2008 results in Dagenham and Morley were repeated at a 2010 general election, they would seize the seats of two of Labour's rising stars, Jon Cruddas and Ed Balls. The political spectrum in England now features for the first time an electable party of the Far Right. In his post-election analysis of the BNP's European breakthrough, *Searchlight* editor Nick Lowles criticised those, particularly in the parliamentary parties, who fail to understand the significance of the BNP vote: 'This is not the protest vote against mainstream parties and useless locally elected representatives that many politicians would like us to believe. It is an increasingly hard and loyal vote which is based on political and economic insecurities and moulded by deep-rooted racial prejudice.'³ This vote, with racism at its core, has a class dimension too, which the left and the trade unions ignore at their peril. Nick describes constituencies that were previously dominated by the car, steel, coal or ceramic industries, all of which have now gone, leaving behind a toxic mix of discontent: 'The identity of the area has collapsed, leaving behind a confused, resentful and alienated minority. This is the cultural war that the BNP has cleverly exploited.'

Breaking-up of Britain

As a result of the processes that have been set in train by devolution, it is quite likely that in the next decade the political terrain will shift quite dramatically, and that this will create the conditions for a racialised English nationalism to flourish, perhaps even to become a dominant force. Ten years ago, following the swift implementation of New Labour's manifesto commitment to devolution, in the shape of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, the first elections to these newly-created legislative bodies were held. In 2009 it is almost inconceivable that this process will ever be reversed; indeed no mainstream party proposes such a move; and meanwhile the Scottish and Welsh Labour, Tory and Liberal-Democrat parties are increasingly independent of Westminster.

In all likelihood by mid-2010 a Tory government will have been elected. But, with no sign of recovery of its fortunes north of the border, support for the

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Conservatives in Scotland will be no more than a modest minority. In Wales it is likely to do better, but not by much. Thus both countries will be governed by a ruling party in Westminster that does not reflect their national electorate. During a similar situation in the eighteen years of Tory rule in the 1980s and 1990s, survival was aided via the compelling narrative that there was an alternative - a Labour government. This time around, with Scotland and Wales increasingly resentful at being ruled from Westminster, the narrative of an alternative is likely to emerge forcefully in the shape of self-government. London-fixated commentators have their eye on the 2010 elections, and almost entirely ignore the imminent 2011 elections in Scotland and Wales. Labour couldn't be contesting these in worst conditions. It will be reeling from the 2010 defeat, and the near-certain period of deep-seated introspection and infighting that will follow, a hollowed out party with depleted and demoralised activists, and the unions will be thinking twice about throwing more of their affiliation fees at a failing party. In such circumstances the chances of Labour turning the nationalist tide are not strong, to say the least. And of course the bulk of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (PC) have already positioned themselves as the sort of social democratic party Labour voters once thought the Labour Party was. Neither party has shown much sign of the two-faced duplicity of the Lib-Dems, who tack left or right depending on how it suits them.

Of course the entire constitutional edifice of a United Kingdom won't come crashing down in the space of the next two years. An entirely independent Scotland and Wales - and a United Ireland - remain distinctly unlikely on that kind of rapid reform timetable. But the process initiated by devolution will accelerate. That is the key point.

Following the SNP's 2008 by-election victory in Labour's previously safe Glasgow East constituency, Robert Hazell, Director of the Constitution Unit, sought to calm rising fears of a secession: 'Independence can only be granted by Westminster: it is not within the competence of the Scottish parliament unilaterally to declare independence.'⁴ But in the wake of sweeping SNP gains at the 2010 Westminster general election, followed by a landslide victory for the SNP in the Scottish Parliament elections a year later, Robert would be forced to reconsider this cosy version of Britain's famously unwritten constitution. The degrees of separation and togetherness are what matters, not the niceties of parliamentarianism.

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English populism and the democratic alternative

If events along these lines occur, the problem of English right-wing populism will be increasingly foregrounded. Chantal Mouffe has expertly pinpointed one cause of the emergence of such populism: 'Far from being a return of archaic and irrational forces, an anachronism in times of "post-conventional" identities, something to be fought through more modernisation and "third way" politics, right-wing populism is the consequence of the post-political consensus. It is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the "voice of the people"'.⁵

Right-wing populism in England, though fuelled in 2009 by fallout from the parliamentary expenses scandal, has been framed, fundamentally, by a version of nationalism that defines itself against outsiders, immigration (and latterly Muslims in particular), Europe, and a form of social democracy it thinks of as un-English - and associates with all things Scottish. After the 1982 Falklands War, when an earlier version of a rampant, rightward-leaning, popular patriotism threatened to engulf England's body politic Eric Hobsbawm identified the roots of its appeal: 'It acts as a sort of compensation for the feelings of decline, demoralisation and inferiority. This is intensified by economic crisis.'⁶ It was precisely these kinds of emotions that had been ignited in the construction worker protests in Lindsey Oil Refinery in early 2009, when, alongside union banners, Union Jacks and 'British Jobs for British Workers' placards were waved. Such sentiments clearly have the prospect of heading off in a reactionary direction, mixing localism with racism along the way.

But this need not necessarily be the case. Also writing in the aftermath of the Falklands War, Stuart Hall pointed to the contestation that is required if a progressive patriotism is to emerge: 'The traces of ancient, stone-age ideas cannot be expunged. But neither is their influence and infection permanent and immutable. The culture of an old empire is an imperialist culture: but that is not all it is. Imperialism lives on - but it is not printed in an English gene.'⁷ With such a recognition of the contestable nature of Englishness, combined with a politics which seeks to link the local to the universal, the remaking of England's national identity could begin on a much more hopeful basis than some assume. But the absence of a progressive popular alternative makes the task much more difficult. So, what might a progressive English politics moulded by the break-up look like?

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First, it will be founded on a commitment to England being an active partner in the break-up, welcoming and supporting the civic nationalism being crafted by politicians and civil society on the other side of our borders. By recognising the democratic alternative of independence to the archaic and deferential imperial British state, we create for ourselves a vision of England after Britain. And that means a break with the politics of Brownite Labour. Since Gordon's elevation to the leadership, Labour has deepened a commitment to Britishness which began with the 'Cool Britannia' era of Blair's post-landslide afterglow. Tom Nairn describes the ideological role of this commitment: 'In 1997 an effective over-arching belief system was urgently needed, above all by a movement then unused to office. Party survival itself prompted this compensation, rather than popular belief. But still, a declining or contested (British) nationalism offered a far stronger chance of redemption than a socialism ailing unto death all around the globe.'⁸ Blairism began by misunderstanding the dynamics of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, believing that devolution could be the buttress on which to build a new Britain in the image of new Labour's conservative modernity. And Brown, learning nothing from the impact of devolution, seeks to see off the threat of a break-up through promoting a Britishness that he has conjured out of misrepresenting civic nationalism: 'We will all lose if politicians play fast and loose with the Union and abandon national purpose to a focus on what divides. All political parties should learn from past mistakes: it is by showing what binds us together that we will energise the modern British patriotic purpose we should all want to see.'⁹ Brown here reveals a wilful misunderstanding of what constitutes a 'national purpose'. He defines Welsh and Scots nationalism as divisive, while seeing British national purpose as beyond dispute. But for a sizeable chunk of the Scottish and Welsh electorate, and now their legislatures too, there is a national purpose alright: it's to the left of Labour and it no longer defines itself as British. There is not much left nowadays of a single British national purpose. But neither - except for some fringe elements - is there a lot of energy for the hatred and division that Brown seeks to summon up.

Second, an English politics that happily co-exists with other nations within a breaking-up Britain will need a vision for its own national settlement. This is bound to be influenced by those new institutions on our borders, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. Despite new Labour's antipathy for proportional representation for Westminster, all three of these are elected under this system, which produces a legislature much more representative of the electorate's

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will than the one we're lumbered with at Westminster. The system does not obscure the necessities of adversarial politics, but at the same time it encourages coalition-building where parties share a broadly similar policy agenda. Similarly, all three have fixed-term parliaments, despite new Labour's opposition to adopting such a measure at Westminster, and this significantly weakens the power of the majority party to set the election date to best suit their own electoral fortunes. The Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish have already seen the benefits of these two vital changes, which have produced a more representative, co-operative and accountable model of governance. And these two changes, at the very least, should be the basis of England's own democratic settlement.

Third, we have already entered an era in which environmental politics have acquired an increasing importance, and climate change threatens to reach crisis proportions in the relatively near future. Civic nationalism at its best combines a politics that defines its citizens as friends of the earth, the country, the landscape and the habitat that we call home with a politics that defines them as friends of the Earth, our planet, demanding global co-operation against a wave of devastation that respects no frontiers. Environmentalism at the core of a progressive nationalism provides an important part of its accompanying internationalist imperative.

Fourth - and arguably, for reasons of demography and history, this will be much more prominent in any English progressive nationalism than elsewhere - there is the need to address issues of race and identity. Brown defined his version of Britishness via an ill-thought out caricature of multiculturalism: 'We are waking from a once-fashionable view of multiculturalism, which, by emphasising the separate and the exclusive, simply pushed communities apart.'¹⁰ For a Labour politician who throughout his long career has hardly uttered a word or written a sentence to suggest any understanding of the complexities of modern racism this was an extraordinary intervention. An English identity based on such shoddy sentiments and rank opportunism will soon flounder in the face of those who will seek to use the break-up to enforce a racialisation of Englishness. Instead we need to construct a framework which celebrates diversity as a core value of social solidarity. As Rachel Briggs has suggested, Brown is in danger of driving the debate straight down a short-cut to reaction: 'For a Scottish Prime Minister in a fragmented United Kingdom, the temptation will always be to reach for that which unites rather than divides. But top-down, stage-managed national identities are not only unworkable, they are likely

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to increase the sense of personal and collective uncertainty, as people are rightly suspicious of what they seek to hide.' Instead Rachel outlines a riskier but more purposeful journey, towards an inclusive national identity focused on engagement with difference rather than its denial. This would, crucially, involve a very different relationship with politicised sections of England's Muslim communities from the kind outlined by Brown. As she argues: 'Activism and dissent can be a pathway into engagement in other forms of civic and political participation and it is only by surfacing and working through difference that we will achieve meaningful and lasting cohesion. It will take political bravery to embrace the voices of dissent and challenge those who have managed to dominate mainstream thinking so far.'¹¹

These four core themes are certainly not right-wing, and nor are they particularly left-wing. That's not the point. They are plural values that appeal across parties, as well as to a majority who have no party to call their own. What will bind together those who identify with the project are ideals - something increasingly rare in modern politics - for an England they want to become. A vision for England after Britain which is both popular and progressive, and entirely different from the exclusively white and rather unpleasant land the populist right would seem to prefer. Together these themes provide, at the point of rupture with the home comforts of Britishness, the tools to imagine what a progressive Englishness might look like. Such a remaking requires a politics of what Gramsci once called the 'national-popular', capable of awakening and organising 'the national-popular collective will'. Such an awakening will be sorely needed by England when this break-up is finally completed.

Progressive patriotism

What remains of the left is not generally very at ease with patriotism as a concept. Eric Hobsbawm's analysis of the post-Falklands version of popular patriotism pinpointed the dangers of its appeal: 'The dangers are obvious, not least because it is enormously vulnerable to anti-foreign nationalism and racism. These dangers are particularly great where patriotism can be separated from the other sentiments and aspirations of the working class, or even where it can be counter-posed to them; where nationalism can be counter-posed to social liberation.'¹² Hobsbawm is indicating that the task of the left is to prevent this separation, to obstruct the

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counterposition of nationalism to social liberation. But he goes further, arguing that if the progressive and the patriotic can be combined then the former will be immeasurably strengthened: 'When the two go together in harness, they multiply ... the force of the working class itself at the head of a broad coalition for social change and they even give it the possibility of wresting hegemony.' This in large measure is what the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Fein have achieved via their differing models of civic nationalism, which are fundamentally social-democratic in content. Yet in England progressive patriotism remains something we leave to the Celtic fringe; our politics has scarcely begun to grapple with its potential.

Patriotism, of course, consists of many elements - though it remains undoubtedly the case that English patriotism is shaped by the imperial and the martial more than most. George Courtauld's 2004 bestseller, *The Pocket Book of Patriotism*, lists battle after battle, the reigns of Kings and Queens, Elizabeth I's address to her troops ahead of the arrival of the Spanish Armada, Churchill's speech to the House of Commons after Dunkirk, the words to *Rule Britannia* and *Land of Hope and Glory*, and a catalogue of the countries ruled over by the British Empire.¹³ Though it is not described as such, this is clearly an English text: the imperial tradition is one which frames modern English nationalism much more profoundly than is the case for the Scots, Welsh or Irish varieties. And this is why, despite Hobsbawm's outlining of the potential of fusion - progressive patriotism - the English left has tended to show not just a casual lack of interest in any such project, but an active opposition to it.

Seven days after the election of the BNP MEPs there occurred an extraordinary intervention in the unfolding debate about what this represented. The Royal British Legion issued an 'Open Letter to Nick Griffin', also carried as an advert in national newspapers: 'The Poppy is the symbol of sacrifices made by British Armed Forces in conflicts both past and present and it has been paid for with blood and valour. True valour deserves respect regardless of a person's ethnic origin, and everyone who serves or has served their country deserves nothing less.'¹⁴ The letter made public the Legion's private request to Griffin not to wear his metallic poppy label badge during the European election campaign. They accused Griffin of politicising this most sacred of symbols for his own ends, and concluded: 'The National Chairman of the Royal British Legion appealed to your sense of honour. But you responded by continuing to wear the poppy. So now we're no longer asking you privately. Stop it Mr Griffin. Just stop it.'

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This was an intervention of which the left, and the anti-fascist campaigns in particular, should take careful note. It skilfully separated our martial history from its use to justify racism, and argued that a politician who would discriminate between acts of heroism and valour based on the colour of the skin of those involved had no right to wear the symbol that honours their sacrifice. This is the kind of conversation that a left which understood progressive patriotism could engage in. Instead it was left to the Royal British Legion to express the horror of a nation that once fought to keep the Nazis out at the election in 2009 of two of their number to represent us in Europe.

Worryingly, in the summer of 2009 a new far right street-fighting outfit, the English Defence League (EDL) emerged. Apparently fed up with the soft-focus racism of an increasingly electoralist BNP, they appeal to those fired up by a hatred of all things Muslim, and are determined to ignite a response that could be very ugly indeed.¹⁵ The temptation for many on the left will be to oppose the EDL with a politics that can too easily be portrayed as anti-English rather than anti-racist, and a refusal to distinguish between patriotism and racism. A section of the left remains utterly determined to portray any identification with England - football team, flag or whatever - as dubious and dim-witted at best, dangerous and divisive at the very least. And this is a deterrent to those who have the wit and the will to distinguish their pride from any baggage of prejudice. The EDL claim the support of football hooligans, but have been unable to muster more than a couple of hundred supporters - a dangerous mob but a numerically insignificant portion of those who will be supporting England next summer at World Cup 2010. It should be the task of anti-fascists to work to ensure that the EDL are clearly seen to be unrepresentative of that support. But to surrender a politics of popular opposition to suspicion about those who wave and wear St George is an active hindrance to this vital project.

England away

In the same week that the two BNP MEPs were elected, on 6 June, it was the sixty-fifth anniversary of the D-Day landings that would help secure the defeat of Nazi Germany. At 9am around a hundred England fans are gathered in Panfilov Park, Almaty, Kazakhstan. We are there for the England game in the evening, but before the game we plan to lay a wreath, a huge floral St George Cross consisting of red

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and white carnations, at the classically Soviet-era Panfilov Battalion memorial monument. The Panfilov Battalion was raised from Kazakh volunteers who travelled thousands of miles in 1941 to fight in the defence of Moscow. In one day the battalion was virtually wiped out, as they destroyed fourteen German tanks with only Molotov cocktails and petrol bombs. By the end of the battle 750 men were reduced to just 28. After we had laid our wreath with the simple message 'Never Forget, Never Again' pinned to it, in English, Kazakh and Russian, this piece of history of which few would have been aware was respectfully explained by one of our number - me. With England criss-crossing Europe in biannual bids to qualify for World Cups and European Championships, we so often revisit sites that remind us of the military defeat of fascism a generation ago, and we always hold the same wreath-laying ceremony, bearing witness to a shared history - at Auschwitz and Dachau, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Monument in Jerusalem, the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, the military cemetery in Arnhem, the Victory Monument in Minsk, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow. We are never on our own, but each time are joined by fans of the country we are visiting - including, of course, German fans at Dachau and Berlin.

For many, world wars and world cups have become almost interchangeable in terms of what they represent - at best just another excuse for a sing-song, at worst an occasion for anti-German triumphalism. Yet by laying our wreath as fans, we carefully seek to re-establish the distinction between our desire to beat Germany on the pitch, and the events of the second world war. The wreath-laying is always well-supported, with the money for the expensive wreath coming from supporters' own pockets, and the host country is always amazed that we would want to honour their memory as well as our own. Media interest is enormous in our effort to create a ceremony that is educational as well as inspirational. It is a simple enough tool for connecting the patriotism evident in the England football shirts worn by every one of us as we lay our wreath to the progressive commitment of remembering how an idea that begins with hate my number can end with the Holocaust. And as the ceremony finishes, on each occasion I read out the simple words inscribed on the statue to Edith Cavell beside St Martin's in the Fields on the north edge of Trafalgar Square - her words as she was marched to face a German firing squad during Word War One. They represent precisely why we lay these wreaths: 'Patriotism is not enough, I must have no bitterness or hatred for anyone'. It's a message that must be engaged with and embraced by all who seek to

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break up the racialisation of nationalism that the BNP seeks. Without it all we will have left is hate, and no hope.

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Notes

1. *This is England*, Director Shane Meadows, Warp Films 2007.
2. See David Williams, 'Steady Progress but no Breakthrough', *Searchlight*, July 2009, p13.
3. Nick Lowles, 'The Way Forward', *Searchlight*, July 2009, p14.
4. Robert Hazell, 'Rites of Secession', *Guardian*, 29.7.08.
5. Chantal Mouffe, 'Democracy in Europe: The Challenge of Right-Wing Populism', The Barcelona Debate, Centre de Cultura Contemporària de Barcelona, 2002.
6. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout', *Marxism Today*, January 1983, p19.
7. Stuart Hall, 'The Empire Strikes Back', *New Socialist*, July/August 1982, p7.
8. Tom Nairn, *Gordon Brown: Bard of Britishness*, Institute of Welsh Affairs, Cardiff 2006, p10.
9. Gordon Brown, 'We Need a United Kingdom', *Daily Telegraph*, 13.1.07.
10. Brown, 'We Need a United Kingdom'.
11. Rachel Briggs, 'Who's Afraid of the Respect Party?', *Renewal*, Number 2/3, 2007, p96.
12. Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout', pp17-18.
13. See George Courtauld, *The Pocket Book of Patriotism*, Halstead Books 2004.

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14. Open Letter to Nick Griffin, Royal British Legion, 13 June 2009.

15. See Gerry Gable et al, 'A Hot August?', *Searchlight*, August 2009; and Tom Woodson's 'Well Connected' and Nick Lowles's 'Hooligans Disunited?', both in *Searchlight* September 2009.