British Identity and Political Discourse:
New Labour, New Britain?

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Abstract: The debate on national identity has been repeatedly employed by political parties in the UK with an interest in displaying the ideal nation that they believe in, an imagined nation that serves as a model for their people and their voters. Britain, having experienced an identity crisis during the last decades after the loss of the Empire and the consequences of globalization and mass migration, is trying to redefine its national identity and rethink a new role in the world. In this context, Tony Blair celebrated a renewed country, a New Britain where tolerance, multiculturalism and modernity characterized the nation he believed in. How did Blair understand Britishness? Which notion of identity did New Labour celebrate? In an ethnically diverse country, homogenizing elements like shared values, institutions, rights and duties have been used to define national identity. In addition, history plays an important role in the conception of Britishness for New Labour, marking a decisive evolution from a tepid recognition of the significance of history to a glorification of Britain’s past.

Keywords: Nation, Identity, Britishness, New Labour.

Precisely since the second half of the twentieth century and the end of the Second World War, the concept of national identity appeared repeatedly in political discourse in Britain. Why have political leaders felt so passionate about including their particular conceptions of Britishness in their manifestos? Why has it been so important to define the country’s identity? It seems that the need to question ‘who we are’ and ‘what we stand for’ is strongly associated with an identity crisis that has been noted throughout history, with periods of lower self-conviction, a need to reformulate the country’s position in the world and the type of society that the nation aspires to be. A decline in British self-awareness is evident when crucial historical events force the whole country to examine its position in external affairs, and to define itself in a new era with recent political and social conditions: ‘the situation changes when a society passes through rapid and extensive changes or faces an internal or external threat to its way of life or very existence, forcing it to ask itself what it stands for, what holds it together, what unites and distinguishes it’ (Parekh 2009: 34).

It has been mentioned on many occasions that Britain has been experiencing an
identity crisis during the last decades. Some of the causes that have contributed to
this redefinition of British identity are, first of all, the very recent loss of the Empire
still present in the subconscious of the nation, which generates a sense of
humiliation, and a loss of status and self-esteem because of the deprivation of
international and national hegemony (if we consider Devolution as an attenuation of
the influence on the first British colonies). In addition, globalization and the
influence of external cultural powers, also, the internal influence of mass
immigration and multiculturalism that befogs mono-culturalism, and last but not
least, the always controversial phobia to the incorporation of Britain in Europe are
other causes of this identity crisis: “the “who we are” … is the result of several
developments: 9/11 and Islamic terrorism, devolution in Scotland and Wales and
the consequent return of the English question, constitutional reform, European
integration, a sharp rise in immigration, controversies around multiculturalism and
the question of whether we need a strong common culture to sustain a welfare state”
(Goodhart in Ascherson 2005).

Many agree on the need to define a nation’s identity in order to clarify to the
citizens who they are collectively and which cultural features unify them so as to
give them a sense of community and belonging: ‘the way a country defines itself is
the basis of its unity and identity. It unites its members around a shared view of who
they are as a political community and why they belong together, and it also
distinguishes them from others and tells them why they are part of this community
and not any other’ (Parekh 2009:34).

Nevertheless, despite the country’s natural need to belong, politicians also
show an interest in making use of the national identity debate in public discourses.
They portray, in their definition of the country and what means to be British, a
vision of the nation they seem to believe in, an imagined nation that serves as a
model for their people and their voters. To a certain extent, they influence people’s
conception of their culture by instilling an imagined identity they think is
representative. Chris Weedon, for instance, suggests that identity is normally
constructed, invented, and influenced by institutions, culture, and society,
reproducing, accordingly, specific discourses of subjectivity (2008: 6) which are
normally institutionalized through official narratives like books, museums, television
documentaries or monuments (26).

When Tony Blair was immersed in the electoral campaign before his victory at
the 1997 elections and afterwards in Number 10, he took great pains to spread his
new concept of Britishness, the well known ‘Cool Britannia’ slogan, which
embraced a young and dynamic country, that was creative, tolerant, multicultural,
modern, and in which ‘openness’ and ‘adaptability’ symbolized an adjustment of the
nation’s role in the world (Blair in BBC news). This notion of the country was a
‘modern vision of Britain: a country at ease with different races, religions and
cultures’ (Blair 2006), which represented the diversity of a new multicultural
society. Consequently, in the context of cultural diversity, how can a national
culture be defined and delimited? In an attempt to claim the meaning of Britishness, New Labour opted for the well-known slogan ‘unity in diversity’, and for those principles that specified that the conception of Britishness were values, institutions, rights and duties.

British values have become a well-known banner used by the Labour government to address a changing multicultural nation and to construct their sense of Britishness. Due to the arrival of worldwide migrants, with different cultures and religions, the government turned to ‘common British values’ to strengthen social cohesion and build a sense of belonging: ‘Today in 2007, we can also be far more confident about a Britain that is defined not by ethnicity but, at its core, by common values and shared interests that, in turn, shape our institutions’ (Brown 2007). Among the values they advocated were tolerance, democracy, individual freedom, equality, liberty, fairness and justice (The Guardian) together with the celebration of the family theme: ‘out of a family develops the sense of community’ (Blair in Seldon 2005: 151).

However, this idea of Britishness based on common values can cause a controversial debate to arise, concerning what values are and to what point they can be considered a referent of nationality. Are values not universal? Or on the contrary, are values culturally constructed? The debate in this respect has been directed to the dichotomy between universal and particular values. Blair and Brown celebrated the need to glorify ‘shared values’ and ‘common principles’ which are ‘what gives us the right to call ourselves British’ (Blair 2006); those principles were apparently what made Britishness distinctive. At first glance, it seems that those common values are supposedly shared by the people settled in the UK; however, it needs to be mentioned that the government made efforts not only to remind commonality what those values were supposed to be, but also to ‘teach them’.

Through the Citizenship Education in schools (see Crick Report) and the Citizenship test, the government instilled the British values they believed in (democracy, freedom, equality, also duties and responsibilities) into both infants and immigrants. Therefore, those ‘universal’ values in which the government’s notion of Britishness was rooted, contradict the government’s intention of celebrating a distinct British identity. In this respect, Weedon criticized the ethnocentric attitude of Western countries, in which their values, understood as universal, were considered the canon: ‘to make European or North American meanings and values universal is at the same time to render all other cultures merely particular and by implication inferior’ (Weedon 2008: 105).

Additionally, another ensign the government defined as crucial for homogenizing Britishness was the importance of celebrating the rights and the duties of citizens. It is based on the discernment of the private and public spheres of national identity. This is to say, there is a need to split the emotional and culturally diverse facets of national identity, from its politically homogenous and civic side in which citizenship becomes the maximum exponent. Blair, in this respect, celebrated
the priority of the public sphere, that is, what defines us as ‘citizens’, with our rights and duties, over what defines us as ‘people’, the private sphere (Julios 2008: 5). However, is not the emotional force of belonging what best describes identity? ‘To say that one is British is to say that Britain means something to one, that one’s membership of it is a significant element in one’s identity and says something important about oneself, that one is shaped by it, has some degree of attachment to it, and feels at home in it’ (Parekh 2009: 33).

Furthermore, another feature to shape identity has been the celebration of British institutions that homogenize the society and its citizens, that are common in a group and provide a sense of belonging: ‘the Westminster parliament, the Monarchy, the new Supreme Court, the judiciary, the common law, the BBC, British Council, civil service, armed forces and the National Health Service’ (Hazell 2009: 104).

Lastly, among Blair’s attempts to rebrand Britain, it is necessary to mention the role that history was going to play in his thought of national identity. Renovation was not only about values, institutions, rights and duties, but it was also a new way of understanding history. In that renewal of the nation’s image, based on energy and enthusiasm, the role of history in their New Britain was still present, but they were not very committed to it: ‘we need to be proud of our history, but not bound by it’ (Blair, 1996: 3). So it seems that history of Britain, at that point in the late 1990s, was going to occupy a background position in order to emphasise a new nation that looked into the future: ‘He said he wanted to launch “New Britain” on the world stage … he wanted to change the lingering perception that Britain was still too rooted in the past, and his task was to project Britain as a “model for a twenty-first-century developed society”’ (Seldon 2005: 284).

However, Blair’s government was ambiguous and contradictory in respect to its position on the importance of history. At the beginning they paid little attention to the role of history when defining national identity, yet they have gradually changed, turning history into a flag representative of British national pride:

A) ‘Others fear that modernizing Britain means abandoning the past. That’s not what this is about. I have always believed that it is by building on our history that we can be most successful […] it is an accumulation of centuries of proud history’ (Blair 2001: 47).

B) ‘I think the days of Britain having to apologise for our history are over. I think we should move forward. I think we should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it and we should talk, rightly so, about British values’ (Brown in Kearney)

Despite the attempts of Blair’s government to appear different and to try to embrace an image of change and uniqueness, the truth is that the conception of Britishness embodied by the Conservatives is not that far from that of New Labour. Here are two examples:
A) ‘Patriotism is important and that we need to strengthen our national identity. We must never forget that Britain is a great country with a history we can be truly proud of. Our culture, language and inventiveness has shaped the modern world, and ensures we are still a significant player on the world stage’ (Cameron 2009).

B) ‘What is required is more emotional connection with the institutions that define Britishness such as our monarchy, our armed forces, and our parliament. These institutions are a vital part of what it means to be British’ (Cameron 2009).

Although national identity has traditionally been a conservative discourse because of the intimate relationship between identity, history and traditions, we see how the notion of Britishness has been sized by the left-wingers. Near to the middle of the twentieth century, Orwell mentioned a need to celebrate English patriotism, suggesting that the coupling of patriotism to intelligence and socialism were not antagonistic concepts (Orwell 1941). Later on, in the 1990s, it was New Labour and its modernization movement which reformulated and appropriated the conception of Britishness:

The first characteristic of conservative patriotism is that the populist version of Englishness has become more prominent that the patrician. This is both a general and a specific aspect of contemporary politics. There remained fixed the general assumption that conservative instincts on immigration, patriotism and national culture continued to reflect the public mood. There was also a specific animosity directed towards Labour’s, in particular Tony Blair’s, usurpation of conservative themes and his occupation not only of Middle England but also of Middle Britain. (Aughey 2007: 137)

Hence, the interpretation of the eternal resistance of history in the national identity debate was mentioned by controversial journalist and author Jeremy Paxman in his book The English, A Portrait of a People (1998). His perception was that English people are, generally speaking, conservative and traditional in character, which is the reason why they feel disposed to claim history as part of their identity: ‘We must accept, first, that a sense of history runs deep in the English people. It may not be particularly well informed (a surprising number of people are unsure precisely how many wives Henry VIII had), but it is deeply felt and is one of the things that makes the people what they are … it is indicative of a deep conservatism’ (Paxman 1998: 153, 154)

Moreover, New Labour’s position regarding the role of history in the description of national identity is an illustration of how the traditional discourse of patriotism and glorification of one’s history seems to be now closer to the left-wing party which had precisely advocated an opposite concept of the country as being a young, modern 21st century nation.
In conclusion, it can be assumed that the debate on national identity is always controversial and vigorous. It is even more intense in nations like Britain, that are experiencing a new historical and social era, which makes them question who they are and which role they play in the world. At the beginning of their premiership, New Labour provided a new vision of the ethnically and multiculturaly diverse country in which values, institutions, rights and duties would homogenize a culturally diverse national identity. However, we have seen that the government’s attempts of modernization ended up being, as Hyland suggested, ‘old wine in new bottles’ (Hyland, 2000), a simple window-dressing for a traditional conception of Britishness rooted in a patriotic self-awareness, thus praising history and proclaiming themselves to be a blessed nation.

Works cited


