



Neal Ascherson Scotophobia

Even before Gordon Brown became prime minister, writes Neal Ascherson, London-based media had been trumpeting a rise of Scotophobia, a waning sense of Britishness, and the imminent emancipation of the Scots. "All three propositions are misunderstandings: some of them wilful deceptions, others defects of political imagination." However, even though it's unlikely that the 300-year union will be torn apart under the current leadership, argues Ascherson, "a truly ambitious, coldly clear-sighted leader — once in power — could bring about a situation in which the Union would unravel and it could be made to seem all the fault of the Scots."

Gordon Brown is prime minister at last. The change in style from Tony Blair is astonishing. Gone is the charm and the fast-talking pretence of intimacy and simplicity. On Britain's TV screens is the unsmiling, square face of a man who hates exaggeration and spin. On the radio is that heavy Scottish voice, speaking in phrases meant to explain rather than to impress.

But he has gone straight into action. Within days of taking office, Brown delivered a long, detailed speech to the House of Commons about constitutional reforms. (In complete contrast to the Blair style, he did not disclose the speech to the media in advance). Most of these reforms are small democratic improvements to the antique British machine of governance. But Brown also announced a "consultation" about a possible bill of rights and duties and even about a written constitution.

Nobody believes that Gordon Brown will leave the United Kingdom with a formal *Grundgesetz*, a supreme law which even Parliament must obey. That would be revolutionary in British terms. But he is trying to reconstruct what he calls "Britishness". Brown is pushing for a new sort of patriotism uniting English, Scots, and Welsh, Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, Muslims, Christians, and all other faiths. This new patriotism would be constructed around loyalty to British institutions, and especially to what he calls "British values".

It's a strange moment to choose for that programme. The United Kingdom, as a multi-national state, is beginning to show signs of disintegration. In Edinburgh, the devolved government is now formed by the Scottish National Party (SNP), which narrowly won the Scottish Parliament elections on 3 May. In the Welsh Assembly, the Labour Party has just reluctantly agreed to a coalition government with Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party. And opinion in England is growing rapidly impatient with the whole constitutional structure. Why is there no English parliament? Why do Scottish MPs vote on English matters? Why should Gordon Brown, a Scot from a Scottish constituency, be allowed to rule Britain as prime minister?

The London-based media make three assumptions. One is that English resentment against the Scots is on the rapid increase. A second is that a waning sense of British nationhood and British values must be restored. A third, involving the state we still call the United Kingdom, is a gathering expectation that the Scots will march out of it. All three propositions, as I see it, are misunderstandings: some of them wilful deceptions, others defects of political imagination.

The first topic is Scotophobia. For the last year, an intelligent Scot reading the London papers, or watching London-made political TV shows, could only conclude that sharp dislike of Scots and Scotland is spreading across South Britain on a scale without parallel since the eighteenth century. The ignorance and nastiness of some of this journalism has been startling. The *Daily Telegraph* described Scotland as "trapped in the squalor of dependency" and asserted that "until recently an English voter hearing Gordon Brown's Fife accent would simply have said to himself 'Labour'; now, he says 'Scottish'". The lopsided devolution settlement has created a sense that the Scots are having their cake and yet guzzling away at it'.

Since then, the papers have railed on. They accused a Scottish mafia of dominating the Blair Cabinet. They suggested that Scottish ministers, from the safety of northern constituencies, were driving through measures hateful to the English, such as tuition fees in higher education (Brown now proposes to cut them). They picture Scotland as pampered by unjustified English taxpayers' subsidies –and yet nagging for more.

On the *Daily Telegraph* website, hatred of the European Union is closely associated with resentment of Scotland. Ending the older Union is seen as the precondition for ending the newer one. "Time to disband the 1707 Union, let the Scots join the Euro, kowtow to the French for extra subsidies &c, and let England move on to its destiny." Some Tory MPs and their commentator friends even proclaim that Parliamentary government will be raped and trampled now that an MP from a Scottish constituency is prime minister.

How real is all this fury, and does it reflect what English people think about Scotland and the Scots? I am certain that on the whole it does not. Southern views of the Scots over the last hundred years have been faintly sceptical — "chippy, lacking in humour, slow to unbend" — but on the whole affectionate. (Contrast English attitudes to Welshness, which, for reasons I am not sure of, are often genuinely hostile). And the English have shown noticeable tolerance, taking on board that some Scottish touchiness was justified. The days when an Englishman could comfortably refer to the Highlands as the most beautiful part of England are now unimaginable (though actually not that long ago). As for Scottish independence, polls as far back as the 1970s showed that most English people thought that it would be "a pity, after all we've been through together, but if they want that, I suppose they have a right to it". Unionist politicians must have found that absence of panic unnerving. They still do.

In other words, this present flare of Scotophobia began as little more than a media ramp, fuelled by and to some extent coordinated with the Conservative Party. Its motives are transparent. When the bombardment opened last summer, it was obviously targeted to damage and disable Gordon Brown, the Conservatives' future adversary, before he reached Number Ten, Downing Street. It's fascinating that professed Unionists should be ready, in order to knock out an adversary, to touch off this barrage against Scottishness in general and Brown's Scottishness in particular, against those damned Scots

who are such fragments of grit in the otherwise creamy perfection of Britain's constitutional arrangements.

Nonetheless, relentless repetition of these grievances does begin to wear a dent into public opinion. Iain MacWhirter, political commentator for the *Herald* papers in Glasgow, received a torrent of cross and sometimes abusive posts — over 1300 of them — when he tried, late last year, to explain Scotland's political and financial realities on the (left-liberal) *Guardian's* website. It was the usual stuff: Scots whining while they grab our money, abusing our parliamentary system and taking over England. As MacWhirter comments, "the idea of a Scottish 'Raj' running England is so extraordinary that it's difficult to say anything coherent about it". But the really interesting point about these emails, like those on the *Telegraph* site, was this: that all but a handful saw the solution to their complaints in ending the Union.

This isn't Scotophobia. It's Anglophilia. The ICM poll of November 2006 suggested that 59 per cent of English respondents would prefer Scotland to be independent, while 68 per cent of them wanted an English parliament of their own. While the media and political campaign against the Scots has not apparently made the English more anti-Scottish in any general, xenophobic way, it has had the effect of boosting the slow resurgence of English national self-awareness which first became noticeable some ten or twelve years ago.

Was that effect intended by the new Tory leadership? It's hard to know. In the short term, there are Tory votes to be gained in the South by calling for a ban on Scottish MPs voting on English matters ("English votes for English laws"). In the longer term, the prize the Conservative Party could win by evicting the Scots from British politics altogether is enormous, so overwhelming, in fact, that it makes most Tory MPs nervous.

Since the 2005 elections, Labour holds 286 of the 529 English seats at Westminster, a clear majority. But this result from Westminster's "First Past the Post" electoral system conceals the fact that the Conservatives actually won more English votes than Labour. The lesson is that any serious Tory revival could carry the party to an almost impregnable domination of English politics — as long as those Scottish MPs aren't there to spoil it.

Tempting in theory — but would anyone dare to pick that prize up? In 1997, John Major tried to make "the defence of the Union" (No to devolution!) his main election plank. It fell hopelessly flat; nobody cared. Today, opinion polls show that the Union is unpopular north and also south of the Border. And yet I suspect that a question worded: "Do you want the break-up of Britain?" would get a different response, at least in the next few years. For the moment, I cannot imagine any Westminster-British political leader bold enough to propose dissolving the 300-year-old Union Treaty. Nonetheless, as I want to show later on, a truly ambitious, coldly clear-sighted leader — once in power — could now bring about a situation in which the Union would unravel and it could be made to seem all the fault of the Scots.

Scotophobia in England is largely a media invention and has not been very effective in its own terms. But it has accelerated a current of English national grievance, political and cultural, which was already flowing. And the object of this grievance is not so much Scotland as Britain itself.

In the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur rides up to a muddy peasant woman and announces: "I am the King of the Britons". "King of the

who? Who are the Britons?" The king answers rather uncertainly: "We are all Britons!" Well, perhaps we are now all muddy peasant women, because the notion of Britain is plainly growing less convincing. The last British Social Attitudes survey showed how, in the ten years up to 2005, the English sense of British identity had declined by 8 per cent to less than half the sample, while primary identification as English had risen by 9 per cent. (The far steeper decline in Scots prioritizing British identity — now down to 14 per cent — has been known and written about for many years now).

It is now nearly ten years since "Diana Week" in London revealed how English nationalism was returning. Central London was a sea of red and white English flags, with hardly a Union Jack to be seen. St George's Cross has become the flag of the heart for millions of English families, a symbol of allegiance which has now spread far beyond the football stadiums.

The big questions about the future of this particular nationalism — whether it will find serious and effective leadership in the English professional classes, and how far it will edge along the spectrum from sullen, xenophobic, "ethnic" feelings towards more "civic" programmes for reform and emancipation — are being avoided by the Brown government. No wonder! This new consciousness begins to challenge Britishness just when Gordon Brown sets out to deepen it. There is a growing conviction among the English that although they form 90 per cent of the UK population, the British state structure condemns them to be its victims and losers.

There are parallels, of course. One was the late Habsburg Empire in which the core imperial population group — the Germanic inhabitants of Austria — began to lose their identity in the age of rising nationalisms. Robert Musil put this well: the Czechs knew they were Czech and the Hungarians knew they were Hungarians within the Empire, but the Austrians were just Habsburgers? I thought of Musil when I read a passage from Sir Keith Ajegbo's recent "Diversity and Citizenship" report. The investigator was talking to a small Year 3 girl, who was the only English child in her class. When all the others had talked about their origins, she said sadly : "I come from nowhere!"

We must allow for differences, of course. The Germans were a minority in their state, the English are an overwhelming majority. And terminology comes into it. People in the Habsburg Empire, weird old patchwork as it was, knew the difference between a nation and a state. In recent history, the Irish, Scots, and Welsh never had any difficulty distinguishing the two either. But the English never grasped it, and few do so even today. It is only in the last ten years or less that you come across Westminster politicians referring to the UK as a "multinational state".

The muddle over words is significant. Nor has it always been exclusively English; in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, successful Scots were happy to describe themselves as "English" in the outside world and did not make much fuss when southerners referred to the whole island as "England". Sir John Seeley wrote his prophecy of global imperial destiny in 1883 under the title: "The Expansion of England". For generations, the fact of England's numerical predominance in the UK was hidden behind the image of the island English as the heroic founding few, outnumbered by the millions inhabiting the British Empire.

It was only in the late twentieth century that civil servants and educators began to insist that English people should be polite enough to refer to themselves as

"British", in order not to offend Welsh and Scottish sensibilities. Patiently, they did so, only to find that the Scots and the Welsh still identified them as English and found all this Britishness stuff rather evasive. Conceived as a well-meaning stroke of political correctness, it had the effect of concealing the truth that the English still used their wealth and numbers to call the shots in the UK. And almost inevitably, the English backlash slowly began. Who were all these eggheads and Eurocrats and Scottish carpetbaggers to tell us who we are and how we should think in our own country? Why should we, the majority, be the victims whose tax money is spent by people we didn't elect? Why can't we have a parliament too?

English self-assertion is the most intimate of all imaginable threats to the "Ukanian" power structure. So the Britishness campaign — or campaigns, because there are several — sprang up in rebuttal. They propose that Britain is a nation, like Holland or Hungary, which possesses some essential cultural identity and "typical values". But I have to say that if you want to get to Britain, I wouldn't start from here. You will squelch into some really bad history. Seven years ago, the BBC History Department made an ass of itself by naming its Millennium TV series "A Thousand Years of British History" (suggestions that a more accurate title would be "A Thousand Years of English Expansion" were coldly received). Even now, it seems that not enough people have digested Professor Linda Colley's work: "Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact (and conflict) with the other" — i.e. with Catholic and then republican France. In other words, Britishness can exist when the nations of the UK face a common external threat or challenge: in war, in the armed forces, in the East India Company or the Indian Civil Service, in a British embassy abroad, and so on. But do these challenges have to be exclusively external? Could a moment of Britishness be sparked by something domestic — like an irresistible cry for social justice?

Many years ago, when Gordon Brown had only just joined Tony Blair's government, he tried to give some body to vapid New Labour slogans about unity. Brown began to analyze possible objects of patriotism, and he proposed that the National Health Service should be such an object. It was a common achievement, a great moral reform done in the name of fairness and justice, and all the inhabitants of the United Kingdom should be proud of it and ready to defend it. (I'm glad he didn't say "die for it"). This remains to me the most impressive thought Mr Brown ever put forward, since he edited the Red Paper on Scotland back in 1975.

It's impressive because what it implies is utterly subversive. Patriotism gathered round an institution of reform created in the name of the people is a republican concept, not an Ancient British one. And that leads to an even more shocking thought. Does it follow that the only way to muster a united New Britain would be around a programme of interventionist state socialism?

But since then, Brown on Britishness has followed a more conventional pattern. In a *Daily Telegraph* interview last year (in which he praised the patriotism of Mrs Thatcher and Winston Churchill, but of nobody in his own party), he defined British virtue thus: "Most nations subscribe to universal values like freedom, but it is how these values come together — in Britain's case, in liberty married to social responsibility and to a belief in what Churchill called "fair play" — and then are mediated through our institutions and our history, that defines the character of the country".

Attractive, but not much there solid enough to build a patriotism on. Jack Straw, foreign secretary under Blair and now Brown's minister of justice, defined "British values" in what he called "a nation of nations" like this: "The core democratic values of freedom, fairness, tolerance, and plurality that define what it means to be British". But don't they also define what it means to be Norwegian? Alan Johnson, when he was Blair's education minister, also had a try: "Free speech, tolerance, respect for the rule of law, which are not exclusively British [values]". Or Slovenian, or Irish, or Australian? He was commenting on the Ajebo report about "Diversity and Citizenship". The report suggested compulsory lessons for 11- to 16-year-olds on British values, emphasizing respect for other cultures and tolerance of religious differences, and discussing freedom and justice. The *Times* snorted: "This proposal is less Elizabeth I and Winston Churchill than Barney the Dinosaur meets the Commission for Racial Equality. Whatever Britishness may be, it is surely not the mush that is now being proposed."

All that one can say is that the mush spoken about Britishness matches the mush thought about Britishness by the inhabitants of this archipelago.

In a chapter of the British Social Attitudes report I mentioned earlier, the research team found that their sample was baffled by an invitation to define British values. They had no idea what these might be. Pressed to rate institutions by their importance to British identity, most of them thought the monarchy and trial by jury were really important, but they didn't think that free speech mattered very much and were not impressed by the way government worked.

Make of that what you will. But note, too, that nobody, and certainly not one of the politicians, counts "equality" in their list of British values. "Plurality" is on sale, and "fair play". But not the equality which mattered so much to English radicals in the seventeenth century — and to the British labour movement in the twentieth.

So where do these so-called British values come from — whose are they really? An interesting question. I was reading an *Observer* review by Rafael Behr of Peter Mandler's "The English National Character", and I came across this: "The Victorians were a bit snooty about European nationalism (which reeked of peasants, pitchforks and revolutionaries in grubby breeches). They didn't want to be just a nation, so they promoted themselves to the status of 'civilization'".

There's something in that. And Behr goes on: "As a consequence of this canny national re-branding, many of the characteristics people think of as primordially 'British' are actually Victorian: austere, eccentric, industrious, beloved of fair play, liking a good pageant, respectful of the monarch, obsessed with decency and propriety, redoubtable, stoical, in possession of a stiff upper lip". A month later, Adam Nicolson wrote almost exactly the same in the *Daily Telegraph*: "There is a propriety to British [sic] nationalism that betrays its Victorian origins: austerity, industriousness, respect, stoicism, fortitude, fairness, regularity, decency. [...] There is nothing particularly British about them. They are the virtues of a Victorian middle class".

But if these bourgeois values attach to a class and a period, did they also attach to other classes? We can be certain now that they were widely shared, at least as aspirations. But the banker in his comfortable family villa in Otley or Bridge of Weir would probably have denied that, regarding the lower orders as

improvident, unreliable, and inclined to expect something for nothing: that Other who is the mirror—opposite of one's own virtues.

If these so-called British values are, then, no more than the values of one social class in one particular epoch, how can they be called "national"? Or was that Victorian bourgeoisie a sort of nation in itself, a roughly uniform social group to be found distributed across a British territory whose other inhabitants were culturally diverse? And here we get to the next proposition. Is it possible that a beast called *Homo Britannicus* can exist, has existed, and may survive in dense woodlands even today?

I believe that it did. Professor Chris Stringer, the famous palaeontologist, has just written a book with this title. He is not describing recent history, but the repeated failure of human groups to establish a permanent settlement in what was to become the British Isles until the end of the Younger Dryas glaciation, some 11 500 years ago. But he is, symbolically, showing that being British has been a discontinuous business, with no manifest destiny about it.

From a political point of view, to be recognized as Danish or Welsh or British requires evidence of some bond with a place identified as "home". From a cultural point of view, it requires the existence of a bundle of attributes which are perceived to be shared — in varying proportions — by members of this community. Some of these attributes may be external and material — tribal costume, hunting equipment. Others will have to do with language, with dietary preferences and taboos, or with techniques of social interaction and courtship. Entry to such a group is proclaimed to depend mostly on birth and lineage, but in practice the group maintains its vigour by a continuous process of fosterage and the acculturation of outsiders.

I am talking, as some of you have guessed, about the British Gentleman. In the course of the nineteenth century, and through the socially-transforming engines of the Victorian "public schools", there was created a ruling elite with a common culture. This culture, originally modelled on the mores and kit of the English landowning aristocracy, came to be carried mainly by the children of the new industrial and financial middle class. That process is well understood now, but I think it's important to reflect how the cultural identity of this group transcended local particularity.

Until very recently, whether you rambled at Land's End or John O'Groats, you would probably have been halted by the most threatening tribal challenge in the English language: "Can I help you?" This landowning figure might be called MacGregor, Griffiths, Penhaligon, or Smith; but although his grandfather might well have spoken with a Gaelic, Yorkshire, or Welsh accent, he would speak in precisely the same public-school tones whether he lived in Caithness or Cornwall. His clothes, his taste in food, the way he carried his gun and addressed his dogs, the coiffure of his wife, the newspaper he read were all non-local, part of the culture of a universal class in which Scottishness or Irishness, backgrounds in land or trade, were transcended in a higher Hegelian synthesis: the global empire of countless races and tongues and customs which he or his relations would serve as officers or governors. No wonder that the question which made a true gent despise the questioner was: "Where are you from?" A universal Gent did not "come from" anywhere. He might have a townhouse and a country house, but he didn't come from London or the local market town. He just was. That was enough for him — although not enough for that little English girl who didn't want to come from nowhere.

What can we call this gentleman culture but "British"? It's not the only example of such a culture. Most multinational empires evolve something comparable. In the mere 70 years of the Soviet Union's existence, *Homo Sovieticus* appeared and multiplied; men and women of European, Caucasian, Turkic, or Mongolian appearance sat in the same offices from the Baltic to the Pacific, under portraits of the same autocrat, sipping standard glasses of tea, smoking the same cigarettes, lifting identical black telephones to say "Nyet!" in the same dead tone. They too had transcended ethnic and familial differences in the universality of a great empire. But *Homo Sovieticus* was generally despised as a moronic automaton, while *Homo Britannicus* is remembered for reasonably fair dealing and unpredictable moods of leniency.

Is he extinct? No, but — at a time when Eton boys have begun to speak with the regional accent of southeast England — he is endangered and has long ceased to be the power-bearing caste. And with the retreat of *Homo Britannicus*, there dissolves the last living proof that Britishness was for a time not just a citizenship but a tangible culture, tiny in numbers and yet absolutely distinct — almost a transnational nationality.

To resume, I have been describing a country — a multinational state — in which the richest and most powerful section of population has grown discontented with its relationship to the other nations. Those other nations, meanwhile, press for more autonomy and a larger share of state wealth. But in spite of some startling opinion polls, it's still pretty unlikely that the component nations are yet ready to vote for the break-up of the state in a referendum.

And what country is that? Yes, it's Czechoslovakia in 1992. The third proposition I wanted to examine was that the Scots are preparing to march out of the Union. But the story of the 1992 "Velvet Divorce" between the Czechs and the Slovaks suggests that we may be looking at that possibility from quite the wrong angle. (I recommend a masterly book called *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye*, by Abby Innes from the London School of Economics).

When Londoners think about Scottish independence, they probably imagine half a million Bravehearts standing in Princes Street and roaring: "Freedom!" That's improbable. Independence can happen by metropolitan push as well as nationalist pull. Much more likely, a series of disputes between Westminster and Holyrood about money and reserved powers will seize up the weak and ill-maintained machinery of devolution. Then the London negotiators may lose patience and tell the Scots that, if they still want more, they should go off and have their own state — by this stage, the simplest solution.

That's a fatalistic scenario: institutional defects working out their own logic. But what about agency? What if some politician in England decided that he or she had an interest in making that machinery seize up?

The background to the Czechoslovak split was certainly institutional and political. After the collapse of Communism in 1989, Slovak nationalism had revived, but mainly as demands for greater autonomy rather than full independence. Meanwhile, the public in both nations felt sceptical about the existing Federal government structures, redesigned in the 1968 constitution after the Warsaw Pact invasion. But the motive power for the split — the agency — was provided by the Czech politician Vaclav Klaus.

An ambitious and crafty neo-liberal, Klaus concluded that Slovak needs and demands would always obstruct his own plans in a federal Czechoslovakia. In

an independent Czech state, on the other hand, he would be relatively unhindered. The difficulty was that neither the Czech nor the Slovak public wanted the Federation to break up. Instead, although discontented with the present structure, they looked forward to a better one.

What Klaus achieved, in the years leading to the final breach in late 1992, was to provoke a series of unacceptable proposals from either side which would end in a separation apparently caused by Slovak nationalist intransigence. In this dance, his tango partner was the Slovak politician Vladimir Meciar, who did not originally want Slovakian independence but fell into almost all the traps dug for him by Vaclav Klaus. The journalist Theodore Draper wrote, "It was as if Meciar pounded on Klaus's door without really wanting to knock it down; to Meciar's surprise, Klaus opened the door and Meciar fell in". As Abby Innes comments, "It was the Czech and not the Slovak will to separation that proved implacable".

Both sides declared that negotiations on a new federal or confederal relationship had failed, and that independence was the only conclusion. Both sides, quite scandalously, refused to hold referenda on Slovak independence or the dissolution of the Federation, because they knew they would lose them. Czechoslovakia ceased to exist on 1 January 1993.

This story puts conventional predictions about the Anglo–Scottish Union in a new light. The congruencies of that Czech–Slovak divorce with the topics I have been discussing are obvious, and the old Klaus/Meciar script can be re–run with a new cast in the British present.

First, politicians and journalists with an agenda have tried to foment a general Scotophobia. Directly, they have failed, but they have encouraged English ethnic awareness and drawn English attention to the defects of the Union as expressed in the devolution settlement. For the purposes of the phobia–mongers, that can count as success.

Secondly, there is now discontent with the 1997 devolution settlement on both sides of the Border. The 1707 Union itself is no longer perceived in England as an indispensable pillar of parliamentary democracy.

Thirdly, the notion of "Britain" is weakening as identity politics — already embedded in Scotland and Wales — take root in England. "Britishness", as the common culture of a group of human beings exercising social and political leadership, has almost ceased to be tangible. The gentlemen class has left the public stage, and the repackaging of Victorian bourgeois ethics as "British values" is too vapid to be a substitute.

So far, the resemblances between us and Czechoslovakia in the 1990s are striking, if never total. But now comes the most delicate question. Does England have a Klaus? Could he already be leading a party? The role of Klaus is implicitly offered to David Cameron, the new leader of the Conservatives. So far, though, it does not look as if he has the power hunger, or the political imagination, to accept it.

But it must be plain that almost all the preconditions for what Vaclav Klaus did, with the stumbling assistance of Vladimir Meciar, are now being rolled out in the United Kingdom. Already, since May, different parties are governing in London and Edinburgh. In a few years, the SNP administration led by Alex Salmond may be facing David Cameron as British prime minister .

From now on, the real strain will begin to bear down on the devolution settlement after its first easy decade. The stage will be set. And all it will then lack is an actor, a politician ruthless enough to divide in order to rule.

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