

Is a Sense of British Identity in Decline?

Devolution Briefings

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Key points

- A sense of shared British identity and emotional attachment to that identity may well be important in serving as a 'glue' holding Britain together.
- Over the last quarter century there have been declines both in the proportions who share a British identity and in the levels of pride in Britain.
- The decline in level of pride seems to have primarily a 'generational' character. Older generations who came of age in the 1950s or earlier have a stronger sense of pride than younger generations.
- This pattern of generational decline appears to have 'levelled out' in England with the 'Thatcher generation' who came of age in the 1980s.
- In Scotland and to a lesser extent in Wales generational change has continued and the gap between England, Wales and Scotland has been growing.
- While this may have implications for the unity of Great Britain, younger generations may be less nationalistic but more civic in their conception of the nation.

Why might a shared sense of national identity be important?

There are two sides to nationalism. One, which has received most attention, is its relationship with conflict between nations. The other, which has received less attention, is its role in promoting solidarity within the nation. David Miller has made a powerful ethical argument for nationality, arguing that:

“In acknowledging a national identity, I am also acknowledging that I owe a special obligation to fellow members of my nation which I do not owe to other human beings”.

Nationality can thus become a basis of mutual obligations and social solidarity: one feels obligations to one's fellow nationals, for example to provide for them in their old age, that one does not feel towards members of other nations. Shared national sentiment can provide a basis for the legitimacy of the state. Metaphorically speaking, we can see shared national identity as providing the social glue that holds a nation together.

Yet a number of scholars have suggested that this social glue may be losing its power in the modern world, at least in the most affluent of the Western democracies. Processes of globalization and economic integration may be eroding traditional national identities leaving individuals free to choose from a much wider range of newer identities, or to assimilate them to a rising, homogeneous “McWorld” global culture, characterised by “mass consumerism...of standardised mass commodities, images, practices and slogans.” (Anthony Smith).

Britain is a particularly interesting case in this context. From its inception Britain has been a multi-nation state consisting of English, Welsh, and Scottish nations. Britishness was a constructed identity which brought these nations together and, as Linda Colley has convincingly argued, was built in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on conflict with the ‘Other’ of Catholic France, on the common project of the British Empire with its military successes and economic opportunities, and on shared Protestant religious and cultural traditions.

Subsequently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it could be argued that common institutions of liberty and parliamentary democracy set Britain apart from the authoritarianism of the European powers and provided a source of pride and cohesion. More recently the foundation of the welfare state has been a major source of pride and, perhaps in a literal as well as metaphorical sense, of social cohesion.

Britishness may therefore be particularly vulnerable to the processes of modernization. There has been the loss of the key sources identified by Colley – loss of Empire, the declining salience of religion and of Protestantism in particular, and, since World War II, loss of a clear Other. Loss of Empire has also been accompanied by declining political influence of Britain globally while the postwar period, up until the 1980s, also saw continuing relative British economic decline. In addition, some of the factors that maintained a sense of British uniqueness in the first half of the twentieth century - parliamentary democracy, civil liberties and the welfare state - are no longer so distinctive in the Western world and do not set Britain apart in the way they did in the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century.

Perhaps not unrelated to this, there have been challenges from within with the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. The forces holding the British together in a sense of an ‘imagined community’ are thus becoming much weaker and less distinctive and simultaneously are subject to greater challenges from outside in the form of European integration and inside in the form of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. It is not perhaps too strong to talk of a contemporary crisis of British identity. Has modern Britain become, as Goodhart has argued, “too diverse and complex to give expression to a common culture in the present, let alone the past”.

Declining British identity

In keeping with the multinational character of the state, most people in Britain have dual identities, thinking of themselves as both British and English, British and Welsh or British and Scottish. When forced to choose, however, people in England are more likely to opt for a British identity while those in Scotland and Wales are more likely to opt for Scottish or Welsh identities. In all three territories however we find a slow,

long-term decline in preference for a British identity and a gradual increase in preference for English, Welsh and Scottish identities. Table 1 shows the long-term trends. While there is a rather ‘bumpy ride’ with considerable variation from year to year (perhaps reflecting particular political events), the general decline in preference for a British identity is unmistakable.

Table 1 Trends in Forced Choice National Identity

	1974	1978/9	1991/2	1996/7	1999	2001	2003
England	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English			31	34	44	43	38
British			63	59	44	44	48
Scotland							
Scottish	65	56	72	72	77	77	72
British	31	38	25	20	17	16	20
Wales							
Welsh		59		63	57	57	60
British		34		26	31	31	27

Sources: Scottish Election Surveys 1974-1997; Welsh Election Survey 1979; Welsh Referendum Survey 1997; Welsh Assembly Election survey 1999; British Election Studies 1992-1997; Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2003; British Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2003; Devolution and Constitutional Change surveys 2001 and 2003.

It is important, however, to distinguish between a sense of British identity as a cognitive self-description from the affective attachment to Britain or to one’s nation. Thus people may describe themselves as British but this may mean little more than that they carry a British passport. An affective attachment on the other hand would indicate some deeper emotional bond with Britain. Our evidence suggests that there has been change in affective attachments to Britain as well as in the cognitive self-descriptions reported in table 1. Comparing data over the last two decades we find that there has been an unambiguous decline in pride in Britain with the percentage declaring themselves to be ‘very proud’ of Britain falling from around 57% in 1981 to 45% in 2003.

Table 2 Trends in pride in Britain, 1981-2003

%	1981	1983	1985	1990	1994	1997	2003
Very proud	57	60	58	54	41	43	45
Somewhat proud	33	32	31	35	43	44	41
Not very proud	7	6	9	8	11	10	11
Not at all proud	3	1	2	3	5	3	3
	100	99	100	100	100	100	100

Source: World Values Surveys 1981, 1990; Eurobarometer 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1994, 1997; Devolution and Constitutional Change survey 2003.

As we can see from table 2, most of the change takes the form of a shift from being ‘very proud’ to being ‘somewhat’ proud, and it is still only a small minority, 14% in 2003, who do not feel proud of Britain. Nevertheless, there is a clear change in the intensity of feeling and a clear decline in the strength of attachments to Britain.

Explaining the decline in national pride

Wider social changes (such as increasing levels of higher education) are probably leading to some decline in national pride in many Western countries, but there are additional reasons such as Britain's loss of Empire and loss of its international role that will probably have led to greater declines in Britain than elsewhere. The major mechanism that contributes to this decline of pride in Britain is almost certainly a generational one: younger people are less likely to have acquired the strong attachments to Britain that older generations acquired in their youth and maintained throughout their adult life.

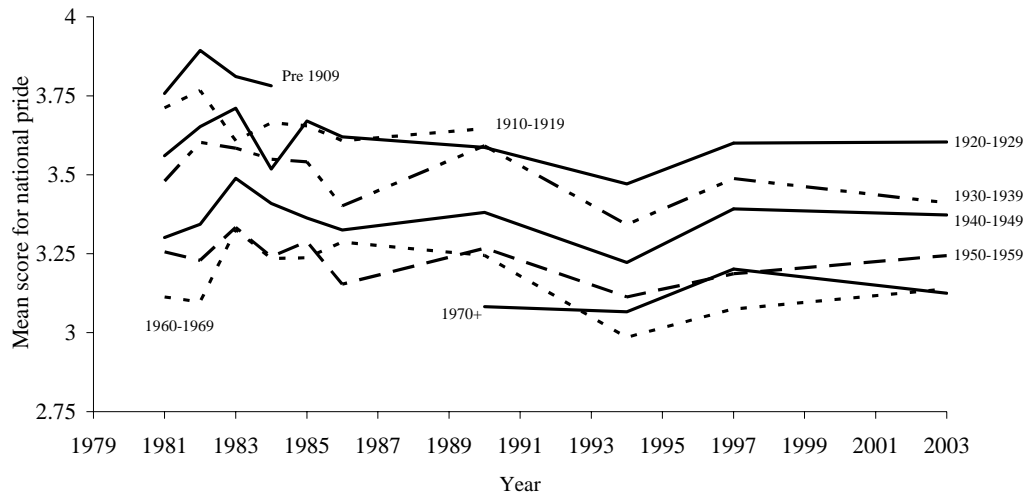
This can be seen in Figure 1 where we chart the strength of national pride (measured on a four point scale where 4 represents 'very proud') over time for different birth cohorts. Thus we can see that people born between 1920 and 1929, and therefore coming of age in the 1940s, show high levels of pride which remain stable over the twenty years covered by our surveys. The more recent generation born between 1940 and 1959 show consistently lower levels of pride, but again their level of pride remains stable over time. And the youngest generations born from 1960 onwards shows a yet lower level of pride.

Figure 1 shows, then, that levels of national pride are rather stable over the life course. This is consistent with the theory that it is the social and political conditions at the time when people came of age that mould their sentiments and identities and that, once established in early adulthood, these identities are enduring ones.

However, Figure 1 also suggests that this process of generational decline stalled among the later birth cohorts. These later cohorts born after 1960 consist of people who were 'coming of age' during the 1980s and early 1990s. This ties in with two important and linked events. Firstly, the 1980s saw the beginning of the end of Britain's postwar economic decline and secondly, particularly after the Falklands War, renewed confidence in the military power of Britain. Objective conditions therefore might have been expected to favour increased levels of pride in newer generations growing up in a more optimistic climate.

Equally importantly, the perceptions of these objective conditions may have been especially favourable given that these generations were socialised during a period in which Thatcherism was the dominant ideology in Britain. Previous research has shown that "Thatcher's Children", the generation coming of age in the 1980s and early 1990s, tend to have absorbed at least some of the Thatcherite message. Thatcherism was famously described by Peregrine Worsthorne as "bitter-tasting market economics sweetened and rendered palatable by great creamy dollops of nationalistic custard". Generations coming of age in this period might have found this nationalistic custard particularly appetizing.

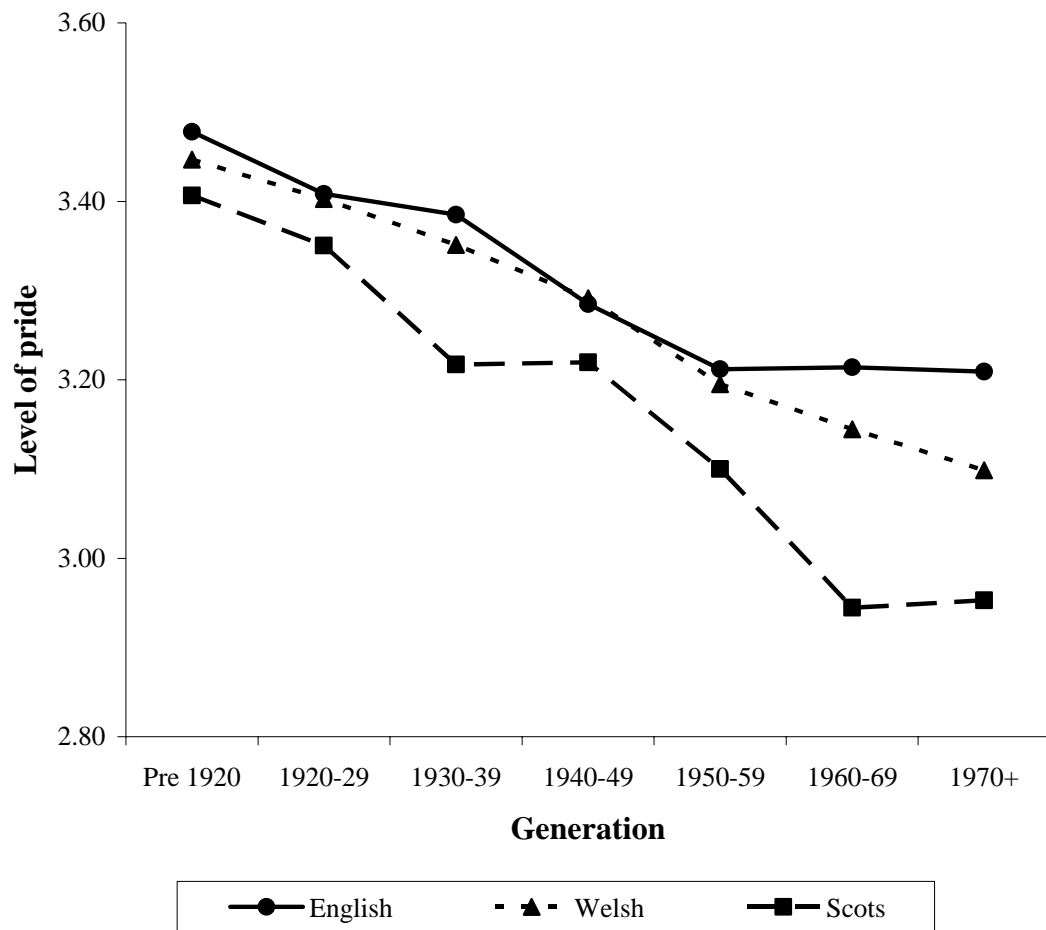
Figure 1 Average levels of national pride scale by birth-cohort, 1981-2003



Differences between England, Wales and Scotland

Thatcherism never appealed in Wales and Scotland to the same extent that it did in England, and a further major finding, shown in figure 2, is that generational change has been more rapid in Wales and particularly in Scotland than in England. Both Wales and Scotland have seen the emergence of nationalist movements that provide a challenge to British identity and sentiment, whereas England has not as yet seen the emergence of a specifically English movement. While the English are perhaps becoming somewhat better than they used to be at distinguishing Englishness from Britishness, there is still little sense of these being rival identities. Younger generations in Wales and Scotland on the other hand appear to have been particularly receptive to the appeals of nationalist movements which have provided alternative foci for loyalty.

Figure 2 Average Predicted score on the national pride scale by birth cohort and nation



Implications

It is important to remember that feelings of national pride have simply shifted from being 'very proud' in the older generations to 'somewhat proud' in the younger generations. This should not therefore be interpreted as a crisis for the cohesion and legitimacy of Great Britain. Nevertheless, the rather different paths taken by generational change in England, Wales and Scotland suggests that, as older generations of unionists die out, the 'glue' holding the different parts of the UK together is likely to become weaker and there will be greater potential for independence movements to make headway. The success of such movements will depend on political contingencies that cannot be predicted, but affective attachments to Britain will provide a weaker defence against separatism than they have done in the past.

On the other side, there may well be some positive aspects of generational change. One common distinction drawn in the literature on different types of national identity is that between 'civic' and 'ethnic' conceptions of the nation. The former tends to place importance on aspects such as respect for political institutions, possessing national citizenship and speaking the national language, whereas the latter tends to place a greater emphasis on bloodlines, ancestry and cultural assimilation.

Ethnic conceptions are associated with weaker support for multiculturalism and higher levels of concern about immigration. What we find is that it is among the older generations with their greater pride in Britain that we are more likely to find ethnic conceptions of the nation while it is among the younger generations with their more restrained sense of pride that civic conceptions are more prevalent.

Given this association between 'exclusive' ethnic conceptions of identity and problems of xenophobia, it seems fair to conclude that evidence showing the replacement of older generations who hold such views with younger, more 'inclusive' cohorts is a positive development. Talk of a crisis of British identity is thus premature. It may simply be the case that a sense of Britishness is evolving in a way that is more compatible with a multicultural and multinational Britain.

This Devolution Briefing was written by Professor Anthony Heath of the Department of Sociology and Nuffield College at the University of Oxford. Professor Heath leads the ESRC Devolution Programme's research project on National Identity and Constitutional Change in England (L219 25 2018), one of a series of interlinked projects looking at public attitudes and devolution in the four parts of the UK.