

Five Hundred Years of Englishness

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A talk delivered for the University of Winchester [Centre for English](#)

[Identity and Politics](#) on 28 Feb. 2017

Shortly before Christmas I took a DNA test. This was not, I hope you are glad to hear, because I was under suspicion for a particularly vile crime, but because I was told it might help fill in some blanks in the family tree that I have been researching for years. I knew my father's family had been in England since the Emperor Charles V threw them out of the Spanish Netherlands in 1547 for having the effrontery to espouse Protestantism, and for refusing to re-convert to Roman Catholicism. I presume they got off the boat in Harwich or Felixstowe and headed inland: and I equally presume they came across a landscape they regarded as looking remarkably like Holland, and therefore chose to settle on the Cambridgeshire fens in a village called Cottenham just south of Ely. In those days before other Dutchmen came and drained it, the Isle of Eels really was an island.

Given the Heffers came here 470 years ago, I felt I had just about earned the right to think of myself as English, whatever that means – and trying to get at what exactly it means is the purpose of my talk to you this evening. My father's mother's family had been in Cambridgeshire long before my father's father's family had arrived there. My mother's family was on one side from Oxfordshire and on the other from Suffolk, and in all cases I have traced them back to the start of parish records in the 1530s. Yet my DNA test turned up a remarkable result from these almost entirely English

antecedents. I was 43 per cent Ancient Briton, which was somewhat less than I expected. My next biggest ethnicity was my 25 per cent Scandinavian, which I can only presume came from Viking marauders well over a millennium ago whose descendants were my English forebears. But I was told I was 11 per cent Irish, quite a chunk of ethnicity for a man with no known Irish ancestors. Now I have always liked and admired the Irish, a sympathy expressed not least in much I have written over the years about how right they were to pursue Home Rule, and in the amounts of Guinness I have consumed. But for someone whose identity was that of an Englishman, to be so Irish was rather a shock. I had expected my DNA to trace me back to the primitive inhabitants of Britain, which it did, and to dark-age invaders, which it also did – and it also told me I was eight per cent Western European, which I presume is my Dutchness, diluted by 470 years of marriage by others into my family.

But where was that Irish from? A study of the tree showed that I knew the exact identities and origins of 15 of my 16 great-great grandparents. The 16th, my father's father's mother's mother, was simply on the tree as a woman called "Ann", and she had to be the key to the mystery of my Irish DNA. She was. Further research eventually revealed that she was a lady from Limerick, who married my great-great grandfather shortly after he had fought at Waterloo. She was born in 1799, and had come to England at least by 1818: so I think my idea of my own identity might remain unaffected, given my last close Irish connection was 200 years ago.

The first thing it makes one understand about what we think of as Englishness, or our English identity, is that it is about nurture rather than nature: the same nurturing process that, over twelve or

thirteen centuries, causes me not to emulate the raping, burning and pillaging of my Viking ancestors has also, in a much shorter period of time, caused it never to enter my head that I am culturally Irish, whatever my genes may say. That is because I had an English father and an English mother; I was brought up by them to respect English values of democracy, liberty and Christian civilization – even though I, like my father before me, am an atheist. I was given a clear and constant idea of where, geographically and culturally, I had come from: and it was England, a place unified by language, attitudes and ideas that have seeped into me throughout my life. I went to an English school and an English university and was surrounded from the earliest times by the prevalent culture of the country in which I live: the King James Bible and the Prayer Book, Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, Vaughan Williams, Turner and Gainsborough, but also cricket, pubs, fish and chips, Ealing comedies, Gothic cathedrals and Georgian cathedral closes, the English landscape and its traditions.

And of course, I was brought up to believe in the institutions that underpin that culture and history – the monarchy, parliament and the rule of law notably, but also my school, which continues to educate generations of grammar school boys as it has done since 1551, and my college, which has tutored undergraduates since 1352, and my university, which came into being eight hundred years ago. We are all victims of our upbringing, and mine – more even than my genes - means I am English, and that I see myself as English.

This brings us face to face with another element that I regard as key to English identity: that whoever we are, whatever our ethnic mix and wherever we have come from, if we are citizens of

England we live in an old country: and the heritage, physical and metaphysical, of that old country must bear upon us. New countries have identities too – ask any American or Australian – but they cannot compare with a past that is all around us, in this polity whose last catastrophic dislocation was in 1066; and many of us have ancestors who have lived in the same territory for thousands of years before that. Most people, English or otherwise, are part of a tribe, but our tribe and its customs have especially deep roots simply because of the sheer antiquity of our culture and the continuity of our habitation of this island. It is a deep-rooted definition of home.

But we are also British, aren't we? This is an important and unavoidable question today, given especially the political changes of the last 20 years. The United Kingdom in which we live is a political construct. It might seem logical that the two big islands of Great Britain and Ireland, separated by only a few miles, should have some sort of political coherence: but it was true for only 121 years, from 1801 until 1922. Since then Ireland has been divided, just as the geographical entity of Great Britain was until the Act of Union with Scotland in 1707: and before that Wales had a separate, but unstable jurisdiction until formally united with England in 1536; and before the Conquest even England was split into smaller kingdoms, which history knows as the Heptarchy: East Anglia, Essex, Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex, Sussex and Kent. What is now Cumbria was not part of England until the time of William Rufus. But with the exception of some fisticuffs over Berwick-on-Tweed, what we think of as England has been England for the last 925 years. It is one of the ironies of the very existence of England

that it owes its form and coherence to the imposition of the will of a Norman conqueror whose own antecedents were Teutonic.

Within England there are regional identities that still echo the Heptarchy in some respects, even if they are a subset of the ancient kingdoms, as Yorkshire is of Northumbria. But whether we come from the north, the west, the south or, as I do, the east, we have something in common above that regional sense that is our national identity. Yet that has changed in the last 20 or 30 years, and it has changed not solely because of anything we in England have done, but also because of political acts by our neighbours in Great Britain who consider, understandably, that they have a different identity from the rest of us: and that, within Great Britain, the sheer weight of numbers that are the English work, in their view, to marginalise or exclude the Scottish and Welsh identities.

Until the mid-1990s, when I was in my mid-30s, I unquestioningly thought of myself as British. I knew, for all the reasons I have stated above, that I was English, and that as a result I felt culturally different from a Scotsman or a Welshman: but British was my citizenship and also my identity. Then two things happened. The debate about devolution for Wales and Scotland, which had been rumbling not just since the 1970s when the Callaghan government tried and failed to effect assemblies in Edinburgh and Cardiff but in fact since the debate about Irish Home Rule a century earlier, reached a new zenith as Tony Blair's Labour party promised to give the electorates in those parts of Britain another chance to vote for a measure of self-government. But also – and this is a cultural and not a political matter – I noticed, in the summer of 1996, a profusion of St George's flags

wherever I went. I am not a follower of football, but this was the year of the European Championships being played in England. We were supposed to win, as we had the World Cup 30 years earlier, but I seem to recall we didn't.

I had spent the first 36 years of my life seeing St George's flags only on church towers. To see them on people's houses and their cars and, of course, their white vans – never mind painted on their faces – was something of a shock. More to the point, the flag seemed to remain rather ubiquitous even after the final final whistle had been blown. Something had happened to English identity, and it was not coincidental that this new awareness of Englishness should come at a time when the media were full of people expressing their determination to be Scottish. After decades in which it had been considered eccentric, or even provocative and offensive, to exhibit an English identity, people who were neither mad nor extremists were doing it.

This caused a period of intense reflection for me, as I am sure it did for many other Englishmen, and did so not least, I am sure, because of that rhetoric mostly from Scotland, but also from Wales, about the outrage felt by many of the inhabitants of those places about being ruled from London. We saw two other tribes on this island asserting, as they had the perfect right to do, their own national identities. I can only speculate about what makes a Welshman or a Scotsman different from me, but whatever it is it is enough to compel many of them to believe it is incompatible with their being ruled from England. In the years that followed I began to have an inkling of how they felt, when the coming of the Blair administration created a so-called Scottish Raj, with a third of the cabinet at one point being composed of men and women who were

either Scottish or, like Mr Blair, Anglicised people born and brought up in Scotland. One began, as an Englishman, to sense a distinct political culture that we had willingly imported from those parts, one that was perhaps more welfarist, more socialist and more questioning of the status quo than we were used to here.

This question of resistance to rule from London by those from different British tribes was addressed as early as 1912 by, of all people, Winston Churchill. He was then sitting for a seat in Scotland, at Dundee, and was First Lord of the Admiralty in Asquith's cabinet. That same cabinet was trying to secure Irish Home Rule, not so much out of conviction as because Irish votes were the only means of keeping a minority Liberal government in power. Churchill, who was of course half-American, was right behind the idea. In an attempt to get the rest of the country to support it, he suggested there should be similar elements of home rule for Scotland and Wales – but not for England. No, England was too big for such an arrangement to be equitable, in his view. What he did propose were regional assemblies in England – back to the Heptarchy, to all intents and purposes.

Nothing came of this idea because, even though there was even then a Scottish nationalist movement, it had hardly any support: and there was no support whatever for English regionalism. Some things never change: John Prescott, you may remember, tried more than a decade ago to encourage support for English regional assemblies, as a counterpart to the Scottish and Welsh assemblies, and to head off mounting talk of a democratic deficit being suffered by the English as a result of devolution that was proving increasingly embarrassing to a Labour government that had promoted devolution. But the English, whose sense of

identity is either strictly local or profoundly national, were not remotely interested, and dealt Mr Prescott a humiliating snub.

The response to the post-devolution assertion of Scottish identity, both from Scotland itself and from within the British government, slowly had an effect on many of us in England. We felt that a consensus had been formed in Scotland that wished to sever ties with us. This greatly distressed some English, for the sentimental reason that we had been partners in the Union for 300 years and, indeed, in an Empire disproportionately ruled by Scots, and had done rather well together. My father's and grandfather's generations remembered another disproportionate contribution to the welfare of the United Kingdom and its empire, testimony to which is borne by the vast memorial to Scotland's dead in the Great War that is to be seen at Edinburgh Castle.

Yet we had more than ties of comradeship: we had ties of blood. I am highly unusual, as an Englishman, in not having a drop of Scottish blood in my veins, according to my DNA test: but tens of millions of my fellow English do, not least our Queen. Perhaps it is the rapid and almost complete dilution of Scottishness by Englishness, once Scots settle in England, that annoys the Scots so much: the sheer weight of numbers oppressing their idea of themselves every bit as much as any structures of political power. Those of Scottish descent in England might maintain their traditions by addressing a Haggis on Burns' Night, or wearing a kilt to a wedding, but for almost all the Anglicised Scots I know it is the Anglicised part of their existence that holds sway, and the odd manifestation of Scottishness that comes as something of a shock.

It was inevitable that, faced with this determination first to pursue separate interests, and then ultimately to separate and

divorce, we as English should start to think about ourselves and our identity. It was made worse when unhelpful people such as me, in newspaper columns, and later on a Labour government under Messrs Blair and Brown who were determined to make the case for the Union, should point out just what an economic beneficiary Scotland especially, but also Wales, were of the Union and of the generosity of the English taxpayer. As a newspaper columnist I have received endless letters and emails over the last 15 or so years about this, and the refrain is consistent: if they dislike us so much, why do they take our money?

We English should have learnt one lesson from the disastrous way in which we handled Irish Home Rule: it is that if a majority of people in a specific part of the Union wish to break away from it, then we should not stand in their way. So if Scotland should at one point choose to leave – there seems far less of a head of steam in Wales – then we have no choice but to let them. (It must be said, in parentheses, that sabre-rattling by Nicola Sturgeon since the Brexit vote, threatening to have another referendum to safeguard Scottish interests, has met with remarkably little enthusiasm, and it is rumoured that even she realises she would lose if she called one.)

The devolution process had two consequences that neither Tony Blair nor Gordon Brown, the architects of the process after 1997, seemed capable of understanding. The first was that many Scots would inevitably view a substantial measure of devolution as a staging post to a plebiscite on full independence and, quite possibly, to full independence itself. The second was that the English would, in response to this outpouring of nationalist sentiment from their partner in the Union, soon recognise that

they too had a national identity and wished to express it and their view of the union. I am not, I must stress, being wise after the event. I published a book – rather provocatively titled *Nor Shall My Sword* – just before the first Scottish and Welsh elections in the spring of 1999 that predicted both these things would happen, and they have.

The book also argued that, in this context, there was absolutely nothing wrong with the English developing an identity distinct from that of the collective of tribes, for the first time in 300 years, and indeed that it was inevitable and that we would come to despise ourselves for want of self-respect if we did not allow ourselves to have an identity. I suggested it was also important for the English mainstream to have what the jargon now calls ‘ownership’ of that identity, and not to allow it to be hijacked by unpleasant extremists or Nazi-style racially motivated nationalists. Sadly, too much recent history spoke of nationalisms that had gone hand in hand with racism, even to the point of genocide. One of the opportunities – and I use that word in preference to ‘challenges’ – of English nationalism is to show to the world that it can exist as a benign and not a malign force, and as a beacon of values of which all civilised people can be proud.

I remember talking to Gordon Brown in late 2004 about this, when he came for a lunch at the newspaper where I then worked. Mr Brown never attended such a lunch for social reasons: he would come because he had something specific to say, and a message to transmit. The message was the campaign he soon spearheaded for something called ‘Britishness’. Part of it would be the notorious slogan ‘British jobs for British workers’, something rendered an absurdity by the terms of our membership of the European Union.

I knew why Mr Brown was pushing this argument: it was because his party had worked out that the gratitude of the Scottish people towards the Labour party that had given them devolution was increasingly being expressed by support in increasing numbers for both its rival party of the left – the SNP – and the SNP’s programme of independence. As Ed Miliband has now found, without Scotland returning Labour MPs in large numbers, Labour finds it impossible to govern at Westminster. So Mr Brown had started to talk up the Union as if his life depended upon it, which, in a sense, it did.

What Mr Brown would not accept was that the English had, or could have, any special grievance arising from their treatment. When I told him that readers wrote to me to ask when there was going to be a referendum in England about the continuation of the union, he could not comprehend what I was saying. Perhaps it was that, having for centuries been seen as some sort of oppressing or colonising power, the English deserved no consideration. It was not for them to dictate who belonged to the Union of which they were the major part, or on what terms: it was for them to accept the terms decided by other members. That arrogant, inequitable and nonsensical approach is not least why Labour ceased to appeal to many in England before the 2010 election, who felt their identity and their democratic rights were being ignored. It is paradoxical that at the same time Labour’s attitude should have alienated so many Scots, leaving them with just one MP in Scotland after the 2015 election.

There is no question in my mind that Scottish attitudes to England have profoundly affected the way the English think about the Scots, the Union and themselves. If you had asked me before

the mid 1990s what nationality I was I would unhesitatingly have answered “British”. Now, with equal swiftness, I would say “English”. There is no such thing as English citizenship – not yet, at any rate – so if pressed on that point, and remembering what my passport says, I should have to answer that I was British. But I have learnt enough in the last 20 years about the cultural and attitudinal differences that separate me from the Scots, the Welsh and what I am learning to call my Irish forebears to realise that, just as they make a point of asserting their identity, I must assert mine. But beyond the distinction between nature and nurture that I referred to earlier, I need to work out what that means, and where it comes from.

I spoke earlier about the reason why the Heffers ended up in England – religious intolerance. But it was the event that caused us to come here – the Protestant Reformation, the 500th anniversary of whose inception we mark on 31 October this year – that has also contributed so much to the commonly-accepted idea of Englishness, with which I and millions of others end up identifying when we seek to work out who we are and where we have come from. England – and I talk about the country that was still entirely separate from Scotland and had not yet finally absorbed Wales – chose to reject the spiritual authority of the Pope not because of theological qualms of the sort expressed by Martin Luther, but because in doing so a new Church could be set up, with the King at its head as Supreme Governor, whose doctrines would allow the King to marry his mistress. This happened in 1534 with the Act of Supremacy.

There then began a programme of expunging the material evidence and practices of the Roman Catholic church from the face

of England, ostensibly for doctrinal reasons but in fact to pillage its wealth and sequester its lands for the Crown. The process gave Protestant bigots a field day, though it was a joy for which some of them would pay with their lives when burnt at the stake under the Marian persecution, when Catholicism made a brief comeback as the State religion between 1553 and 1558. Almost the first thing Elizabeth I did on succeeding her half-sister was to restore the Act of Supremacy that Mary had repealed, and set up a Protestant state church with herself as Supreme Governor: the Henrician appellation of 'Supreme Head' was mildly diluted, since it sounded like a challenge to God. The 39 Articles were drawn up as the ground rules of this church, and if you are curious to know where one idea of Englishness comes from, you should look at the 37th Article, which as you probably know you will find in any copy of the Book of Common Prayer. Let me read it to you in full:

THE King's Majesty hath the chief power in this Realm of *England*, and other his Dominions, unto whom the chief Government of all Estates of this Realm, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Civil, in all causes doth appertain, and is not, nor ought to be, subject to any foreign Jurisdiction.

Where we attribute to the King's Majesty the chief government, by which Titles we understand the minds of some slanderous folks to be offended; we give not to our Princes the ministering either of God's Word, or of the Sacraments, the which thing the Injunctions also lately set forth by *Elizabeth* our Queen do most plainly testify; but that only prerogative, which we see to have been given always to all godly Princes in holy Scriptures by God himself; that is, that they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the

stubborn and evil-doers.

The Bishop of *Rome* hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of *England*.
The Laws of the Realm may punish Christian men with death, for
heinous and grievous offences.

It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate,
to wear weapons, and serve in the wars.

I have mentioned before that I am atheist, but it is important at
this juncture that I make the point again: because the statement I
have just read is from the prayer book of our established church,
and yet to me it defines better than anything else I can think of an
idea of Englishness, English attitudes and English values. It is
something we do not have in common, necessarily, with the Scots
or the Welsh, and certainly not with the Catholic Irish. Let us
unpick those attitudes and values.

It begins with a lucid definition of sovereignty. Everybody in
England answers to the King – what, in this era of constitutional
monarchy, we would term ‘The King – or Queen – in Parliament’ –
and no foreigners have any say in the matter. Singled out, later on,
as one who explicitly has no authority in this realm of England is
the Pope himself or, as Archbishop Matthew Parker – who,
understanding both the mind of the Queen and the political
imperative that she and her advisers agreed upon, finalised the
wording – could only bring himself to term him, the Bishop of
Rome. I remember reading a fascinating guidebook from the 19th
century that detailed what an English man or woman was to do if
visiting Rome and called upon to meet the Bishop himself. The

author divided these English into two groups: that minority who, usually through an accident of history, happened to be Roman Catholics, and the far more normal Englishman who was an Anglican or, perhaps, a member of one of the dissenting or nonconformist sects. For the former, the Pope was their spiritual leader, and they should (however distasteful it might be to others who might witness the spectacle) go through the procedure of kneeling, clasping the Pope's knees and kissing his ring. For the latter, the Pope was simply another head of state (and a very small state at that), and all they need feel compelled to do was to bow.

In this less formal age such differences have been eroded. But the independence from the Catholic church that the Acts of Supremacy and the 37th Article in particular have given us has created a whole English mindset: one that treats foreigners with politeness, and quite possibly as equals, but does not kow-tow to them. The arguments about sovereignty that we had a year ago, in the debate leading up to the Referendum, trace their roots back to the 37th Article, which itself tried to design a constitutional conception of an England that had existed since the aftermath of 1066 but had never been independent of foreign authority. Last year, we decided by a popular vote that the Treaty of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this realm of England. We did so for all sorts of reasons, but one was the feeling so many in England have grown up with that, much as some of us like Europe, and European culture, and European holidays, an European food, we just do things differently here, because that is what we have done for a long time.

And the rest of the 37th Article sets out certain other core English values which, when distilled, present us with the mindset

of the typical Englishman before what might best be termed the present age of sophistication, cosmopolitanism, enlightenment and globalisation. It is a doctrine of leaving people alone, and of those in authority ensuring that people were left alone by invoking God as their right to use the civil sword against the stubborn and evil-doers. And if evil-doers won't get the message, then they shall suffer condign punishment under our rule of law; and if foreigners become aggressive towards English interests, then the English will have a war with them to teach them a lesson. It all sounds familiar, because it is familiar.

When, nearly a century after the establishment of this Protestant English doctrine, the whole basis of the English national settlement came under threat first from Charles I and then from his wilful younger son, James II, the English people – content in their severance from Rome and with the idea of an authority, both spiritual and temporal, that was less pressing on their lives – dealt with both in uncompromising terms. The first was by civil war, the Protestant opposition to the King led by a surprisingly large section of the English nobility but readily joined in by thousands of English yeomen and small landholders, a prominent example of which was the Godly Huntingdonshire farmer Oliver Cromwell. And when, 40 years after his father's execution, James II tried to reimpose Catholic doctrine on England, another group of parliamentarians saw to it that he was deposed in the 'Glorious Revolution' and replaced by his Protestant sister Mary and her even more Protestant husband William of Orange. This sort of sectarianism seems so alien to us now, and many of us are old enough to have seen at first hand the terrible trouble it has caused, and in small measure continues to cause, in Northern Ireland.

However, it has shaped the institutions, from the monarchy downwards and the nature of that monarchy, that we consider to be part of our birthright as English people today – and this is true whatever faith we English are, or even if we have none.

The Reformation brought with it debate and discussion. It opened up new lines of thought and of inquiry. We had always been a trading nation – the Hanseatic League, with whom we had done business since its foundation in 1358, had been a main source of London's prosperity – but the Reformation set up England as a commercial power the like of which had never been previously seen, because of the development of the Calvinist idea of the Protestant Work Ethic. Also, Protestantism lacked the idea of rigid social stratification that Catholicism imposed on its adherents. The Anglican hymn may have talked, in the 19th century, about “the Rich Man in his castle/The poor man at his gate/ God made them high and lowly/ And ordered their estate”, but that was a sense of order more likely to be found in Catholic societies than in Protestant ones. By the time Mrs Alexander wrote those words in 1848, England especially was a feast of social mobility, as in some measure it had been since Tudor times.

Protestantism brought increasing secularity to England, and that drove social mobility. The last great Catholic political force in English life, Cardinal Wolsey, may have started out as a butcher's boy from Ipswich, but he was a rarity of his times. Within a century of the Glorious Revolution a new middle class had grown up. It led the Industrial Revolution that would make this country such a formidable power in the 19th century and it embodied the spirit of commerce and buccaneering that would build an empire. Scotland and Wales shared in some of these things too, of course, but they

were historical events that entered into the English psyche and shaped English attitudes. And they have something in common with the attitudes of the Dutch, the Danes, the Germans and the Swedes, four other northern European countries whose experience of the Reformation and its consequences were similar to ours.

One thing we must be sure of, though, was that just because we consciously broke from European jurisdiction that did not mean we broke from European culture. Indeed, 25 years after the Glorious Revolution— in the interests of maintaining the Protestant succession that had, since 1701, been enshrined in statute law – we invited the Elector of Hanover to sit on the thrones of England and Scotland, the two nations having been politically united seven years earlier, the union of their crowns having been accomplished in 1603. His direct descendant sits on the throne of the United Kingdom today, though she – despite more recent infusions of German blood through her grandmother Queen Mary and her great-great grandfather Prince Albert – seems to most people to be remarkably English – as does her husband, whose family are the Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburgs. Our royal family serves many purposes, not the least of which is to show that in acquiring a national identity nurture wins every time over nature. Again, Americans, of course, know this better than anybody.

That political union in 1707 left certain things in Scotland unchanged, ensuring that right from the start the English would feel a difference from the country with which they were now wedded: Scotland's distinct legal system and what in the 18th century was its much more advanced educational system are the two most obvious examples. The Elector of Hanover, who spoke hardly any English and who, as King George I, had to preside over

the cabinet meetings of the government that ran this new nation, found it much easier to delegate decisions to a Minister who acted in his name. Thus it was that Robert Walpole became the first British prime minister in 1721. The monarchy had been becoming less absolute and more constitutional since the Restoration in 1660: and when a monarch attempted to reverse that trend, as James II did, he was soon removed, albeit in a less violent way than his late father. George I's further delegation of his prerogatives was simply a continuation of the process: and it has become part of every Briton's expectation of the monarchy that it will now remain almost entirely ceremonial.

That expectation applies whether one is English, Scottish or Welsh: but it was noticeable in the discourse among some Scottish Nationalists during their referendum campaign in 2014, and indeed in earlier election campaigns, that there is a strain of republicanism among Scots that is far more pronounced than that among the English, even though the Queen is the 9th great-granddaughter of James I and can trace her ancestry back through him to Robert the Bruce and Kenneth McAlpin. At the time of the Diamond Jubilee five years ago, 80 per cent of Britons expressed themselves in favour of the monarchy. I have been unable to find a breakdown by region, but anecdote tells me that for every Jeremy Corbyn I find in London telling me he would like an elected head of state, I can find three or four in Edinburgh telling me the same thing.

With Scotland there clearly is a difference of political culture with England. Wales, like the UK, last year voted to leave the EU; but Nicola Sturgeon repeatedly tells us that although the UK Brexit vote was 52-48 to leave, in Scotland it was 62-38 to stay – with,

she always fails to add, a sizeable proportion of her own supporters wanting to come out, for the same reasons of disconnection that working-class people in England felt. England voted for Brexit by 53.4 per cent to 46.6 per cent. Many in Scotland see the EU as something they would rather belong to, and receive financial assistance from, than the Union of the United Kingdom. The English, being more than ten times larger in population and proportionately more prosperous, worry less about being part of an economic bloc, and have never seen the EU as integral to the defence of the country, preferring to regard NATO as providing that protection.

What linked both England and Scotland was that in each country there was a sizeable number of people who resented rule by a foreign power: the difference was that in England's case the foreign power was the European Council, based in Brussels, but in Scotland's it was the people with whom they have shared the governance of Britain for over 300 years, and who – with the help of many Scots – set some conditions of policy for Scotland in matters such as defence, foreign affairs and the National Lottery in London. The other difference was that in the United Kingdom as a whole there was enough support, thanks to the English, for ending what 17.4 million saw as the country's subservience to the European Council; in Scotland there was not enough support to end what some Scots still see as Scotland's subservience to England, perhaps not least because those who were advocating it in 2014 had no idea what currency they would use after independence, or whether they would be readmitted easily to the EU. That the crash in the price of oil since then would have ruined Scotland is, frankly, neither here nor there.

With more and more English residents seeing themselves as English rather than British, it is important to legitimate that identity as well as to try to define it. Because we are by far the richest and most populous part of the Union, we are often warned that it might appear arrogant or aggressive to assert our identity. Well, that depends how we do it. Imagining we have a divine right to rule our weaker neighbours is unthinkable: our partnerships with Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland exist by consent. But the government was seriously mistaken in not allowing England a formal say in the future of the Union when it allowed Scotland one: it seemed as though England counted for nothing. It was also wrong to allow Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs to continue to vote in the House of Commons on matters that in their own countries are dealt with by Cardiff, Edinburgh or Stormont. The English-votes-for-English-laws compromise put forward by the Coalition government was intellectually preposterous, as were arguments by SNP MPs on why they should be allowed to vote on English domestic matters while maintaining the absolute veto on English MPs voting on Scottish ones. This sort of anti-English nonsense, often professed by thick English politicians, has heightened a sense of grievance in England and, with it, heightened a determination by the English to have the same rights and powers as everybody else in the Union. It is ironic, but was all too predictable, that any attempts to give special privileges to non-English MPs would only inflame the nationalist feelings some English politicians were trying to avoid.

Why, though, were they so keen to avoid them? I fear it is because some politicians can only imagine a benign form of nationalism in these islands if it is practised by anyone apart from

the English. If we do it, it has to be of the shaven-headed, jackbooted, National Front variety that still occasionally pollutes the atmosphere at football matches. This is nonsense: our nationalism and our national identity are quite capable of being benign. Let us say that they are based on the values embodied in our old institutions – equality under and access to the law, individual liberty, Judaeo-Christian teachings, parliamentary democracy and the newly asserted by ancient right to be masters in our own house. I would contend there is nothing wrong with any of those things, and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. For too long, because we were a very racially homogeneous country, we associated the label ‘English’ not just with geography but with ethnicity. That is no longer viable. As far as I am concerned someone born and brought up in England whose heritage is African, Asian, Middle Eastern or European is an English person. I have nothing against them remembering and marking their own cultures: but I hope they will take something from ours, or otherwise there is little point in them choosing to stay here. If they take our much clichéd values of decency, tolerance and fair play, then they will have done especially well. As with those English whose genetic inheritance is mostly from these islands, and who choose to live here, the new English must give a spiritual allegiance to England, to English values and English institutions. Then we truly shall all be equal.

But of course every one of us in this room who is English by that, or any other, definition will know what it means to him or her to be English. The same is true of any other national identity. Who can forget the immortal opening of General de Gaulle’s war memoirs, where he said: “*Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une*

certaine idée de la France.” ‘All my life, I have had a certain idea of France.’ Well, all my life I have had a certain idea of England. At an obvious level it was the village where I grew up and the landscape around it, and the village not far away from it where I have spent the last 25 years. It is the great national institutions to which I show respect, by accepting our rule of law and the Queen’s sovereignty in parliament. It is, as I said earlier, that idea of an old country. All this would be available to me if my father had been a first-generation immigrant, rather than my Heffer ancestors having arrived here fourteen generations ago. What helps me in my idea of Englishness, and in defining my own national identity – for that is all any of us is qualified to do – is that, more than living here all my life, I look at a landscape and at a nation in which my people have lived for centuries, and at institutions that have governed them as they govern me. Having used the phrase several times in this talk, that, perhaps, is best what I mean by the sense of living in an old country.

I love the culture of this country – I listen to Vaughan Williams, read Dickens and Milton, admire Turner’s pictures and revel in Ealing comedies, the last of which perhaps best of all sums up the sort of harmless, decent people that we are. But even when I listen to Beethoven, read Proust or Kafka or admire a Renoir, I am no less English. But I am perhaps clearer now than I was two decades ago about how much my sense of my national identity differs from that of a Scot as it does from a Frenchman or a German or a Czech. The ancient baggage of Englishness is heavy, and we all carry it. But it is a rather fine suite of luggage, a little battered, but well-made, and rather admired by other travellers through this world. Those of us nurtured as English have enjoyed

good fortune. At a time when our relationships with the world are changing, we are lucky we have a stable home to go back to. But it is not in the English nature to stay at home: in the age of Raleigh and Drake we were a pioneering people and great traders. We are about to have to fall back on those resources again, and in dealing with the years immediately ahead, once the government has accomplished what the referendum told us are the wishes of the British people, we shall be very glad that there are such things as English traits, for they will be, as they were before, the key to our success.