

Nostalgia, xenophobia, anti-neoliberalism: the roots of Leave's nationalism

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*Nationalism is a key element of the Leave campaigns, says **Michael Lloyd**. But it takes very different forms on the right and left – and indeed in England and Scotland. On the right, nationalism draws on a nostalgic view of the Commonwealth. On the left, it subscribes to an English exceptionalism that believes a federal Europe is incompatible with the struggle against neoliberalism and capitalism.*



Some of the arguments made by the Leave camp appear to be linked to nationalism. Sometimes, as in the case of UKIP, it is a nostalgic nationalism. At other times it is a more xenophobic nationalism. It is important, for those of us who take the view that the future prosperity and geopolitical influence of the UK lies in an active partnership within the EU, to understand the mainsprings of these underlying nationalistic themes.

However, I would suggest that these nationalisms relate to England rather than to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This is not to deny the nationalisms within the Celtic nations (with two 'nationalist' traditions in Northern Ireland). However, these Celtic nationalisms tend not to be directed at challenging UK membership of the EU.

The Empire and Britishness

English nationalism is a more slippery concept than might be imagined. As Kumar (2003) persuasively argues, for the English, presiding over an empire, there was no distinction made between being English and being British. In the global world of the British Empire, to be British was sufficient. It also enabled the Scots and Welsh to be co-opted into the British identity and to play key roles in imperial Britain.

But it is clear that *until relatively recently* (the last 20 years), with the increasing devolution to the Celtic nations, and the rise of a more aggressive Scottish ethno-nationalism, English nationalism has been a subdued affair. The even more recent rise in popularity of UKIP – an essentially right-wing English nationalist party – has drawn attention to demands for an English parliament. As Kumar suggests – despite UKIP's appeal in both some suburban and rural middle-class areas *and* some socially and economically deprived working class enclaves – the vision of Englishness presented is taken from the 1920s:

It is an England that is rural or small-town, white, male, middle or upper-middle class, and fearful of change and the challenges of a global, multi-cultural world. (Kumar, 2003).

This latter-day, English nationalism appears to be being forged by a challenge from the nationalism in Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Welsh nationalism) and a fear of globalisation. This pressure and tension is exacerbated, for some English nationalists, by the fact of the UK's membership of the EU, and their antipathy towards it.

We need to analyse a little further this antipathy towards the EU. First, one needs to separate the attitudes of the right and the left.



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The objections to the EU on the Right, even viewed simply as a trading bloc, go back to the formation of the Anti-Common Market League (ACML) in 1961, following the first failed attempt of the UK to join the EEC. Principally attracting Conservative politicians and activists, the nostalgic nationalist element was focussed on free trade with the world and maintaining the UK's trading links with the Commonwealth, particularly the white Commonwealth countries, e.g. New Zealand. In the longer run this concentration on the Commonwealth did have an impact on the UK's negotiations with the EU in the early 1970s prior to accession. Achieving access for New Zealand butter and lamb and West Indies cane sugar occupied many hours of negotiating time of the UK civil servants and politicians involved. Echoes of this position are clearly present in the position on the right of the Leave camps.

In 1969 the ACML morphed into the wider [Campaign for an Independent Britain](#) (CIB) which is still active and campaigning for the UK to leave the EU. Despite the name Britain in the title – and referring to the comments from Kumar above – this appropriation of the title Britain is to cover the *English* nationalism which informs its positions. One of these is on sovereignty and democracy, so going beyond the trade and economic issues of the ACML.

Xenophobic nationalism

The other, xenophobic, English ethnic nationalism on the right, shading into violence from time to time, is associated with the National Front, the BNP, and the English Defence League. An element of this xenophobic nationalism may be seen in occasional outbursts from UKIP members, even though UKIP immediately distances itself from the individuals concerned and formerly disavows any such position.

What is true is that UKIP working class voters, particularly in the north of England, felt that they have been left behind in socio-economic terms and are threatened by EU migration which they equate with the forces of globalisation. The fact that the EU could be seen as a mitigating force protecting against any negative influences of globalisation is ignored.

Anti-EU sentiment on the left

The objections to the EU on the Left – though this point will be rejected by many on the left – are also informed by a nationalistic perspective. In this case it is the maintenance of a view which argues in favour of attempting to create 'socialism in one country'. It is not possible to argue that this is a peculiarly English nationalism, though ironically this is a view prevalent on the left of the Scottish Nationalist Party. However, its underlying rationale is partly linked to

a British/English exceptionalism in how to mount a successful challenge to capitalism or, latterly, neo-liberalism. There is often, in some sections of the essentially English Left, a misunderstanding and neglect of the history and current positioning of other European left groupings, parties, and movements.

More broadly, this undercurrent of nationalistic thinking also relates to the opposition to what is presented as an increasing federal Europe. This is partly because the term federal, in the UK, is seen as equating to centralisation. Despite the fact that this is exactly the opposite of what federalism means – i.e. the distribution of governance powers to the most appropriate decentralised level – its misapplication aids the idea that, in the EU, power is increasingly being centralised in Brussels.

Finally, the growth of English nationalism over the past 20 years or so has also made it difficult for some to appreciate that we all have multiple identities. One can be English and European at one and the same time, just as one can be a fiercely independent Geordie and also be English.

It will be interesting to see what part this resurgent English nationalism – linked to a British exceptionalism in relation to continental Europe, and bolstered by a misunderstanding of federalism – will play in persuading the English electorate to vote to leave the EU in the referendum. It is to be hoped that it will be recognised that sharing power is perfectly compatible with retaining national identity.

K Kumar. 2003. The Making of English National Identity, Cambridge University Press

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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