

Fuzzy Frontiers of Identity: The British Case

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This article is concerned with the historical, social and political construction of a British identity the nature and contours of which are exceptionally difficult to analyse. The impenetrability of a specifically *British* (as opposed, for example, to an *English*) identity confronts us at many turns, and may indeed constitute one of its intrinsic elements. A good example of the opacity of my subject-matter is shown by the recognition of no less than six categories of British nationality in Acts passed during the 1980s – British citizenship, British Dependent Territories citizenship, British Overseas citizenship, British Subject status, British Protected Person status and British National (Overseas) status.

Multiplicity and obscurity at the legal level is paralleled by confusion at the level of public discussion and private belief. Any attempts at greater definition appear to be strongly resisted by dominant political actors. Perhaps concealment of such matters is deliberate, or at least functional? In his vehement critique of the ‘blanketing English fog’ that obscures ‘any social and historical reality’, Perry Anderson (1992: 31) advances just such a suggestion:

The hegemony of the dominant bloc in England is not articulated in any systematic major ideology, but is rather diffused in a miasma of commonplace prejudices and taboos. ... Traditionalism and empiricism henceforward fuse as a single legitimating system: traditionalism sanctions the present by deriving it from the past, empiricism binds the future by fastening it to the present. A comprehensive conservatism is the result, covering society with the pall of simultaneous philistinism (towards ideas) and mystagogy (towards institutions), for which England has justly won an international reputation.

If there is ‘mystagogy’ and ‘philistinism’ among the English ruling class, it has ramified into both legal definitions and élite and popular understandings of the idea of ‘Britishness’. Restated in my terms, the boundaries of British nationality, identity and citizenship are only very imprecisely drawn and understood. This indeterminacy can be thought of as a series of blurred, opaque or ‘fuzzy’ frontiers surrounding the very fabrication and the subsequent recasting of the core identity.

How then to proceed? My starting point is an increasingly common one: a complex national and social identity is continuously constructed and reshaped in its (often antipathetic) interaction with outsiders, strangers, foreigners and aliens – the ‘others’. You know who you are, only by knowing who you are not. Between the familiar (a word tellingly close to ‘familial’) and the strange (note again the linguistic affinity to ‘stranger’), lies a set of frequently unexplored and unstated frontiers. These frontiers can be crossed at several points of access and linkage, but they also may constitute a formidable barrier to integration and the development of a pluralist society. The more open the frontier the higher the levels of tolerance and association, the more closed the higher the level of xenophobia.

What then do I mean by a *fuzzy* frontier? Many influential discussions of ethnicity, nationalism and racism (for example, B. Anderson 1983, Gates 1986, S. Hall 1991 and Goldberg 1993) have mounted a fierce attack on the ‘essentialists’ or

'primordialists'. Race, nation and ethnic group are held to be constructed (not inherited) categories, shaped by political interests exploiting social antagonisms. While my discussion is in sympathy with this view, it draws greater attention to the *sites* of ideological, social and cultural encounter. These, I suggest, take place at the ambiguous edges of an identity, rather than at its core. Frontiers are seen in both a metaphorical and more literal sense. By investigating the outstations, checkpoints and turnstiles where these boundaries are policed, defended and defined, it should be possible to discern how an insider gets separated from an outsider, a 'self-hood' from an 'other-hood'. The concept of 'fuzziness' also draws on the notion of 'fuzzy logic' used by natural scientists, particularly mathematicians, who have a method of proceeding by eliminating the uncertain edges of a problem. This method seems to get results, despite not conforming to formal logic. In aspiration, my notion of a 'fuzzy frontier' has something of the same methodological intent. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that some frontiers (for example, the line that divides Britons from aliens) are less fuzzy than others. Moreover, fuzzy frontiers can be 'internal' or 'external'. Internal fuzzy frontiers might exclude unpopular minorities from power and resources, or marginalise small national groups within a culturally hegemonising dominant group. Again, rather as one can twist the lens of a manual camera to secure greater or lesser definition, the degree of focus (i.e. fuzziness or sharpness) along different frontiers of identity can be varied situationally and temporally.

In this article I discuss six fuzzy frontiers in turn. First, the Celtic fringe. Second, the heritage of the Dominions. Third, the Empire and non-white Commonwealth. Fourth, the continuing Atlantic and anglophone connection. Fifth, the relationship to an emergent European identity. Finally – a concern that cannot be pursued at length here – the British notion of and relationship to 'aliens'¹. The six fuzzy frontiers are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

[Figure 1.1. about here]

The Celtic fringe

The first fuzzy frontier of identity is within the British Isles itself – where I need to set out the extent of association or distancing between the Scots, Welsh and Irish (the Celtic fringe) on the one hand and the English on the other.

The Scots

The Scots have always been regarded with an element of fear and not a little incomprehension by the English. Antoninus's and Hadrian's walls sought to limit the incursions from the northern frontier but failed to prevent wars between the English and the Scots in the Middle Ages. The Crowns of Scotland and England were united in 1603, but not until over a century later (in 1707) were the two parliaments joined under the Treaty of Union. This cemented the alliance of the 'lowland Scots' with the English, while still excluding the 'highland Scots' (still sometime articulating a separate Pict identity).

It is illuminating that it took what at first looked like a photo-finish British election in 1992 for Prime Minister Major to recognise that the long-articulated and widely held Scottish demand for devolution (the nationalists want independence) constituted a significant constitutional crisis. It was not the Scots who were 'sleepwalking' into the new situation, as the prime minister asserted, but the English who, at all key

decision-making levels, had been totally oblivious to the nationalist undercurrents of the previous twenty years.

In his path-breaking study of ethnic nationalism within Britain, Nairn (1977: 96–8) traced the origins of separatist and nationalist movements to the uneven impact of industrial capitalism as it spread from its heartlands in England and France around 1800. Nationalism, in Nairn's view, was an inevitable outcome of this uneven development. It is perhaps better to say that it was an inevitable *demand* for, as Nairn himself accepted, a successful nationalism requires a powerful bourgeoisie and an active intelligentsia to act as the medium through which the dilemma of underdevelopment is refracted and articulated. Ignoring the now all-too-frequent cases of sheer revanchism and atavism (seen, for example, in the post-1990 disintegration of Yugoslavia), nationalism thus normally has some practical component. It draws popular and powerful opinions into the idea that a materially-beneficial outcome might result from some form of separatism. The prospect of oil revenues flowing to Edinburgh rather than London, together with the idea of bypassing Westminster in order to effect a direct relationship to Brussels, provides just such a horizon for the Scots in the intermediate future.

The Welsh

The prospect of material advance through separatism is notably less likely in the case of Wales. As Colin H. Williams (1982: 145) has argued:

Generally the advantages of co-operation, even incorporation, outweigh the disadvantages of loss of autonomy for minorities who benefit from access to wider markets, increased standards of living and unfettered participation in the central political system. The interesting feature of Welsh nationalism is not its chequered progress during the twentieth century, but that it should exist at all, given a period of state-wide participation when Welsh-based politicians, and those which [sic] they represent, have enjoyed a disproportionate influence in the development of the United Kingdom.

The perceived benefits gained from the incorporation of Wales have meant that its nationalism has predominantly taken a romantic, cultural form, in contrast to the more hard-headed Scots variety.

The Welsh are also unable to draw on a long history of independence. Despite various military uprisings led by Lord Rhys (in the twelfth century) and Owain Glnidwr (in the fifteenth century) the expression of nationhood and independence remained elusive. It was eroded again when the Tudors, a Welsh family based in Anglesey, succeeded to the English throne at the end of the Wars of the Roses. Though providing a line of English monarchs, the Welsh never had an uncontested monarchy themselves. We thus have the paradox that Wales is popularly included in the expression 'United Kingdom', though unlike Scotland it was not a kingdom at all, but, at best, a principality. Again, while it has been many decades since a Welsh family ruled England, Prince Charles, an English Prince, is Prince of Wales.

Without the possibility of Scottish oil-wealth and given the interdependence, indeed virtual complete overlap, of the English and Welsh economies and politics, the pockets of nationalist resistance represented by Plaid Cymru are not regarded as serious threats to the unfettered expression of an English identity. Though resident English families often manifest their resentment at having to learn Welsh in school, this rarely transmutes to a positive recognition of the legitimacy of their neighbours' cultural, linguistic or separatist demands. The Welsh National Eisteddfod – the key annual cultural event founded, it is believed, by Lord Rhys in 1177 – is normally regarded by the English in Wales as quirky, eccentric, or the object of humour. The event is ignored in the English popular media.

One other aspect of nationalism affecting both the Scots and the Welsh is the development of intense sporting competition. As Holt (1990: 7) has shown in his

stimulating history of British sport, sporting patriotism did not unify the British nations; rather it resulted in an often bitter reaction to English dominance:

The rise of a new kind of popular 'Welshness' and 'Scottishness' and its expression through rugby and football make British sport unique – in certain events Britain and Northern Ireland compete as a united nation, in others the UK is a federation of four nations each with its own teams; it is as if the French sent representatives from the Languedoc, Brittany and Provence alongside a team from 'France' on the basis that these 'countries' had once been self-governing states.

The Irish

If the force of Scottish nationalism has barely gained recognition in England and Welsh nationalism is regarded as almost harmless, Irish national consciousness has always presented a far greater conundrum to the English. The English incursion stretches as far back as 1171, when Henry I declared himself to be lord of Ireland. Irish resistance to English domination was only suppressed by the brutal campaign of Cromwell (1649–50). Rebellion flared up again in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century when the starvation and mass emigration that followed the potato blight were blamed on the rapacious English landlords. (Ireland has not yet recovered demographically from these events.)

An important barrier between the two nations – and one that prevented a Scots-type union – was the long hostility of the English Crown, and (after Henry VIII) of the newly-established Anglican Church, to Catholicism. Here was the taproot of the English perception of the Irish as troublesome dissenters. The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 (which gave Catholics the opportunity to sit in the central parliament) failed to stem nationalist demands. Gladstone produced two Home Rule Acts and a third that never came into existence because of the outbreak of the First World War. For Sinn Féin this was the moment for armed rebellion and the proclamation of a republic.

Partition, dominion status, then finally, independence followed for the 'south'. The 'north' was allowed to opt out of independence and six of the nine counties of the old Ulster province (mainly Protestant in religious affinity) exercised this right in 1925. Northern Ireland, with its own parliament, was then bolted on to the UK, but in a characteristically nebulous way. The Westminster parliament continues to allow the direct representation of Northern Ireland constituencies (implying that it is an intrinsic part of the UK), yet the mainstream mainland political parties have not so far organised there (implying the opposite). The suspension of the Ulster parliament and the advent of direct rule from Westminster might suggest yet another constitutional status – that of a colony – though this characterisation would be fiercely repudiated by all but the Republicans.

Violence continues on a more or less daily basis in Northern Ireland between the mainland occupying army, the Republicans (proclaiming their defence of the interests of the Catholic minority and their link to the Irish revolutionary tradition) and the Loyalists (who declare their largely unreciprocated fidelity to the UK – or should it be 'the rest of the UK'?)

Despite frequent constitutional tinkering, since 1925 there has been little political discussion on the mainland as to how the communal violence in Northern Ireland is ultimately to be resolved. Only the frequent bombs disrupting life in parts of England – including, in recent years, a mortar shell at 10 Downing Street, a fatal and massive bombing at the Conservative Party conference in Brighton and the murder of two innocent children in Warrington in April 1993 – met with more determined efforts to promote peace towards the end of that year. The limited attempts to effect a settlement in the previous 25 years probably had less to do with the famed English phlegmatism in the face of danger than with their incomprehension of, and impatience

with, the Celtic fringe and particularly its Irish component.

In the light of the English governing class's hostility to the Irish, it is especially notable that all the Irish, *including* Eire citizens, have enjoyed both a largely free right of entry to the UK and the right to cast their votes in a UK election. This concession was granted after the split in 1925 and long before the UK and Eire both joined what is now called the European Union (EU). (There were some modest restrictions enforced during the Second World War when some Irish sympathy for the Nazis was evident.) This extraordinary constitutional anomaly seems to have been adopted and accepted over the years with virtually no public discussion of its merits or logic.

Free movement *and* voting rights in national elections for other EU nationals now look visionary in the context of an emerging Europe, despite the normal continental perception that the UK is 'dragging its feet' on European constitutional matters. I can well remember the incredulity of some continental political scientists when I described the arrangement at a conference in Paris in 1992. (Le Pen, the French right-wing populist, proclaims in his campaigns that a vote for 'foreigners' means no less than 'the end of France'.) Is the favourable electoral situation of the Irish on the mainland attributable to tolerance, to the much self-advertised intuitive political skills of the English ruling class, or simply to Perry Anderson's 'blanketing English fog'? I can advance no definitive answer here. However, what we might be observing is a largely unconsidered response to the fuzzy frontier between the southern Irish and the northern Irish on the one hand, and the English on the other.

The Celtic fringe, in short, is a familiar but inexplicit internal boundary. For the English, the boundary is marked by irresolution, uncertainty, incongruity, derogation or humour. 'Humour' (if such it be called) is still directed against the 'dumb Irishman', derogation is still aimed at the Welsh though, in the case of the Scots, ethnic humour has been in rapid decline since North Sea oil has started flowing.

In subsequent sections of this article, I concentrate my attention on the interaction between 'the British' and people whose origins or settlement lie outside the British Isles. This does not mean I am insensitive to the fact that many of my observations hold by analogy *within* the British Isles. For example, attitudes of extreme xenophobia have been applied by the English to the Irish as well as to external racial minorities and aliens. Formally, however, Section 32 of the 1948 British Nationality Act declared that British protected persons *and* citizens of Eire were *not* aliens. Despite this backhanded compliment, many Irish people understand their history as a 'colonial' one – involving subjection to an alien government. When they live on the mainland, they often do so as invisible sojourners, part of the landscape, but rarely active members of civil and political society.

By contrast, I am also aware that (depending crucially on the period and circumstance discussed) the attitudes and conduct towards outsiders I have described sometimes as 'English' have their larger British manifestations – in so far as these attitudes are shared by others within the Celtic fringe. However, where this is possible, I try to use the terms 'English' and 'British' with some precision.

Class and gender dimensions

Before I turn to the world outside the British Isles, two special features of British identity need comment. First, the expansion of the British abroad in the form of colonies of settlement and Empire often had a differential impact on different classes. It was true that all classes were drawn into expressions of patriotism or jingoism at

particular moments – as, for example, in the anti-French sentiments at the time of the Napoleonic wars, during the Fashoda crisis, the Crimean war, at the outbreak of the First World War and during the Falklands crisis.

But the Empire was often an upper- and middle-class quest. Even the colonies of settlement were, for many working-class people, outposts that they were condemned to by poverty, unemployment, orphanhood, homelessness or a vicious judge, rather than being ‘undiscovered’ frontiers for the brave and patriotic spirits among them. Moreover, the ineptitude and callousness of the British generals towards the conscript troops during the First World War (in the memorable phrase ‘Lions led by Donkeys’), often propelled the working-class movement to an insular nationalism rather than to an expansionist jingoism.

If anything, the evolution of a British national and imperial consciousness was even more unevenly articulated in the case of women. The most penetrating accounts of women’s national consciousness are confined to English, rather than British, women. In her discussion of the reactions to Governor Eyre’s brutality in suppressing the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865, Catherine Hall (1992: 255–95) shows how two intellectual currents came to be emblematic of two conceptions of an English identity. The first, but weaker, strand was led by John Stuart Mill who had intuited the political connection between the bondage of slavery and the bondage of womanhood. His was a more egalitarian, more feminised and less racist version of an English identity. Mill and his supporters wanted to prosecute Eyre for his killing and flogging of the Jamaican protesters, who included many women.

By contrast, the other narration of the Jamaican events, supplied by Thomas Carlyle, described Eyre as a ‘brave, gentle and chivalrous’ man. Despite being a Scot, Carlyle called on the English nation ‘which never loved anarchy, nor was wont to spend its sympathy on miserable mad seditions’ to be grateful for Governor Eyre’s prompt action in overpowering the rioters (p. 283). As Hall argues, the woman, the child, the servant, the employee and the slave were all the brutalised ‘others’ separated from the manly, independent ‘self’. That self was in turn identified with proudly inarticulate but doughty John Bull figures like Eyre who sustained a masculine, ethnocentric and conservative version of Englishness.

But, if Englishwomen were excluded from the John Bull version of Englishness, the unfolding of their public personae was none the less closely associated with expressions of patriotism. As Linda Colley (1992: 236–81) shows, despite many formal restrictions on their civic rights, in practice many Englishwomen gained a separate and recognised voice by supporting the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. When a small French expeditionary force landed at Fishguard in 1797, it had to be protected from the fury of the local villagers, the women being ‘more clamorous and making signs to cut their throats’ (pp. 256–7). Throughout the nineteenth century, making flags, banners and warm clothing for the troops, raising wartime subscriptions and providing relief to wounded seamen and soldiers were the principal means whereby women could transcend their confinement in the domestic sphere. With Victoria’s accession to the throne, the female Roman emblem for Britain, Britannia, was increasingly clad in sword, shield and armour. In the process Victoria von Saxe-Coburg-Gotha had smoothly moved from German princess to Queen of England and Empress of India.

Fortunately, there were intimations of a less bloodthirsty role too. The male organisers of boycotts of slave-produced sugar found a ready response from many women who refused to serve ‘slave sugar’ at home and shopped only for ‘free sugar’. In this early example of a consumer boycott, women’s private and public domains were united but, suggestively, only in the context of an emergent women’s and national consciousness articulating with its larger imperial surrounding.

The English and British abroad, the creation of colonies of settlement, plantation

colonies and later, a massive Empire, were to be intimately bound up with the construction of the British identity in general, to the frontiers of which I now turn.

The Dominions

The xenophobic right is prone to describe the British Isles as under siege from a horde of restless foreigners about to invade their historically undisturbed homeland. This is a curious myopia as it takes little account of the many early invasions of Britain by the Vikings, the Normans, the Romans and others, or the fact that the British have themselves been highly energetic colonisers of other people's lands. Many of the population invasions of the last 250 years started, not ended, in Britain.

British expansion abroad commenced with the plantation economies initiated under the aegis of mercantile capitalism. The plantations predominantly deployed slave, indentured and contract labourers from Africa and Asia who were regarded as racially inferior. Their subordination was regarded as morally permissible. However, it is perhaps important to remember Eric Williams's (1964: 7) non-racial corrective that, 'Unfree labour in the New World was brown, white, black and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan'. He shows how 'redemptioners', convicts and white servants from Ireland, Britain, Portugal, Madeira and elsewhere, were sent to the West Indies before the planters turned to Africa. (Small, pathetic communities descended from these groups, like the 'Red Legs' of Barbados, still survive today.)

However, the bulk of British migrants went not to plantation colonies, but to the United States and to what are sometimes described as 'the colonies of settlement'. These were New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Rhodesia and South Africa. What linked these countries together was that in each territory the British migrants were ultimately numerous enough or powerful enough to assert, or try to assert, independence from the motherland and hegemony over the indigenous populations. In short, the settlers captured the political institutions from the colonial power (sometimes only for a short while) and sought to deny access to those institutions to the local inhabitants. Most of the countries mentioned became Dominions in a formal sense between the two world wars, but the description can be used more analytically (dominions with a small 'd'), as it aptly captures the superordination that the settlers sought to assert.

The USA is probably the most successful example of a dominion society in this latter sense, in that it relatively easily shook off vacillating British rule during the American Revolution and widened its frontiers to include large parts of Spanish Mexico. Other settler dominions also established their right to self-government, in each case (and like in the USA) with deleterious effects to the indigenous populations. The British in Australia killed the Aborigines and virtually destroyed their way of life; the British in New Zealand crippled Maori culture; the Canadians forced the Inuit peoples into reservations. To each of these three countries the British government accorded formal Dominion status – i.e. self-government and a franchise to the settlers – while showing only token regard for the native peoples.

In all the dominions, a 'British' identity became hegemonic. English and Welsh law, the English language, the Anglican church, English sporting traditions,² and Westminster-style political institutions either became paramount or were accorded a high status.

Settlers fared less well in the remaining dominions and colonies to which the British migrated. In Kenya, the Mau Mau put paid to a wild attempt by the tiny settler group to declare 'white independence'; instead decolonisation placed power in the hands of the black élite. In Rhodesia, Ian Smith managed to sustain a Unilateral Declaration of Independence for about a decade, but he too was finally laid low by the force of an armed African struggle.

In South Africa, that most difficult of countries to classify and typologise, the construction of a pure dominion society was inhibited by the contrary pulls of Boer and British ambitions (demonstrated by the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902), and by the counterforce of African arms. Whereas the Boers organised successful shooting parties against the helpless San and Khoi-khoi (known in politically incorrect days as the Bushmen and Hottentots), the Zulu impis proved rather more formidable opponents. The fate of settler society in South Africa now hangs in the balance. Whereas the European population's political monopoly is now nearly at an end, its social and economic dominance is nevertheless likely to remain important.

Given the highly variable and often costly outcomes of the movement of European settlers to dominion or aspirant-dominion societies and the historical association between large populations and big-power status, it is perhaps worth reflecting for a moment why British governments generally encouraged the movement of Britons abroad. In essence, emigration to the settler countries was seen both as a solution to social problems at home and a means of expanding English interests abroad. This notion was first advanced in a state paper delivered to James I by Bacon in 1606. He suggested that by emigration England would gain, 'a double commodity, in the avoidance of people here, and in making use of them there' (cited E. Williams 1964: 10). The poor rates and overpopulation would be relieved and idlers, vagrants and criminals would be put to good use elsewhere.

Once established, the principle was extended laterally. Scottish crofters, troublesome Irish peasants, dissident soldiers (like the Levellers) all were shipped out with careless abandon. Even the reverses of British power in the United States were attributed not to a design fault in its pro-emigration policies, but to the incompetence and capriciousness of the German monarch on the British throne at the time of the American Revolution (the first in his line, incidentally, who could speak some English). The movement to encourage the export of the surplus British population reached its apogee in the work of the Cambridge professor of history, Sir John Seeley, who, in his book *The Expansion of England* (1883), identified emigration as the key means of effecting British imperial designs.

The relationship between the British at home and their dominion-diaspora abroad has been cemented by ties of kinship, economic interdependence and preferential trade arrangements, by sport, by visits and tourism, and by the solidarity wrought by the sharing of arms in two world wars and other encounters like the Korean conflict. Until quite recently many New Zealanders, Canadians, Australians and white South Africans and Rhodesians/Zimbabweans stubbornly clung on to British passports as a means of affirming their British identity and hedging their political bets. Young men and women from the British diaspora abroad still often spend a *rite de passage* year in England. (They concentrate with a remarkable lack of imagination in Earl's Court in London: the nearest area between Heathrow and central London with a large rental market.)

Education, legal training and certification also bonded the dominions (and the Commonwealth more generally) to 'the mother country'. One small example is the Rhodes scholarship programme, which draws young men from the white dominions and the United States to Rhodes House in Oxford. The programme was endowed by the famous British imperialist to celebrate the achievements of the British abroad and secure a cohort of key administrators for the Empire. (After protests in the 1980s from former scholars a small number of black and female Commonwealth scholars were accorded recognition.)

The attempt to cling to a linked British home and diasporic identity defined primarily by descent and racial phenotype, was, however, to be severely challenged on a number of fronts.

First (as was shown in the illustration of the Rhodes scholars), it proved difficult to

be too racially specific – the wider Commonwealth comprised a brown and black Empire as well as the zones of white settlement. Indeed the very *raison d'être* and guiding vision of the post-1948 Commonwealth was that it was a *multiracial* association of states with a common historical link to Britain. So crucial was the ideological commitment to multiracialism that the 'white' members of the Commonwealth had to concur in the decision to expel South Africa for its apartheid policies in 1961. Continuing Commonwealth boycotts and sanctions against South Africa and the denunciation of Ian Smith's ultimately doomed attempt to declare unilateral white rule in Rhodesia reinforced the message. (On the other hand, the continuing pull of racial affinity was shown in the British government's reluctance to send UK troops to Rhodesia to put down the rebellion of its own 'kith and kin', a phrase that gained currency at the time.)

Second, with the post-war movement of Commonwealth citizens from India, Pakistan and the Caribbean to Britain, it became increasingly difficult to uphold the idea that a British identity was exclusively a white identity. In short, with decolonisation and non-white Commonwealth immigration, another fuzzy frontier had appeared. Although I will expand on this theme in other chapters, here it should be noted that a number of determined attempts were made in post-war British immigration law and practice to bolster the myth of a racially exclusive British identity. In brief, the four main legislative interventions were:

- In the British Nationality Act of 1948 the status of a 'Citizen of the UK and Colonies' was invented. This was distinguished from the older category of 'British subject' (who still had rights of abode in the UK), and also from a 'British subject without citizenship'. This last category applied mainly to people from India and Pakistan, who were henceforth subject to immigration controls.
- The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was introduced as a means of controlling non-white Commonwealth immigration. Henceforth, most Commonwealth citizens were subject to immigration control and had to obtain a Ministry of Labour employment voucher in order to enter the UK.³
- The intriguing concept of 'patriality' – a word apparently not previously in any dictionary, but rather coined by an official in the Home Office – was introduced in the 1971 Immigration Act. It allowed the right of abode in Britain to citizens of the UK and Colonies and Commonwealth citizens who had a parent or grandparent who was *born* in the UK. This massively widened, on essentially racial grounds, the categories of non-patrial citizens of the UK and Colonies, non-patrial Commonwealth citizens and British Subjects without citizenship, who henceforth had no right of entry to the UK.
- The British Nationality Act of 1981 (which came into force on 1 January 1983) proliferated the number of British 'citizenships' without right of entry and also introduced, for the first time in British immigration history, the notion of *jus sanguinis* (the law of blood). Since 1983, people born in Britain of non-British citizens do not automatically acquire British nationality and citizenship. Though small numbers are involved, the compelling and long-standing principle that birthplace confers citizenship (*jus soli*), has been breached.

Despite these and other zealous measures designed to buttress a racially-based British identity which fused white Britons to their diaspora in the dominions, a third and final factor undercut any neat correspondence between Britishness and whiteness. I allude to seismic shifts in the post-war international political economy, which impacted both on the UK and on the white British diaspora.

The UK's historic decision to enter the European Economic Community (now the EU) swept away any realistic possibility (though not the pretence) that it could maintain an independent world role. Public rhetoric that Commonwealth interests would be safeguarded was recognised, even at the time, as empty and tokenistic. As

discussed below, British identity was now to be entangled and constrained along another fuzzy frontier – that of a European identity.

Events of similar impact were affecting the old white dominions. For the Canadians, already heavily intermeshed with the USA, although with a distinctive state ideology of multiculturalism, negotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1991 was seen as a sad though inevitable result of their geopolitical situation. The minority British diasporic communities in Zimbabwe, and increasingly in South Africa, are gradually being corralled into accepting black majority rule. Thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, may take up their opportunity to live in the UK, but over the next generation many will lose their ‘patrial’ rights and will slowly adopt a single, local citizenship. Australia and New Zealand still have close cultural, familial, sporting and linguistic ties to ‘the mother country’, but the entry of the UK to the European Economic Community (EEC) represented a brutal familial rupture. Wool, butter and lamb exports were immediately affected, but the abandonment of the Commonwealth as an economic unit also had a profound psychological effect, particularly in Australia. Prime Minister Keating’s angry outburst in April 1992 that Britain had deserted Australia in the Second World War by its precipitate withdrawal from the Far East was yet another slash at the old umbilical cord. New Australians from southern Europe and Asia rarely share the British link, republican sentiment is growing and the country increasingly relates more to the Pacific Rim and *its* hegemonic power, Japan.

The diasporic identity

Until these more recent events, the British abroad provided a crucial expression of (and gave vital reinforcement to) the evolution of a British identity in general and an English identity in particular. Like other diasporic communities, exaggerated mannerisms and demonstrations of patriotism often made the English abroad more English than the English at home. And, despite the distinction that Jean Rhys found in Dominica at the turn of the century, the separate English and Celtic identities were more easily overcome abroad than at home.

The exaggeration of metropolitan manners, particularly in the case of the English, but not forgetting instances like the ‘kilt culture’ of the overseas Scots, derived directly from the imperial heritage – the heritage of the quasi-aristocratic rule over ‘the natives’. Again Perry Anderson (1992: 32) provides a penetrating insight into the origins of this manifestation of overseas ‘Britishness’:

The administration of an empire comprising a quarter of the planet required its own special skills. Imperialism automatically sets a premium on a patrician style. . . . Domestic domination can be realised with a popular and egalitarian appearance, colonial never: there can be no plebeian proconsuls. In an imperial system, the iconography of power is necessarily aristocratic.

Those old enough to have observed the British colonial administration at work would be struck by the force of Anderson’s observation. In remote regions of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean middle-class English administrators affected the manners of lords. Even working-class Britons who fled post-war Britain for the easy lifestyle available in southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s soon adopted the overbearing *hauteur* of a racial élite. The misapprehensions derived from the colonial experience of patricianship were also demonstrated by African and Asian students and visitors to the UK who were often surprised to find a normal occupational structure (white rubbish collectors, milkmen, etc.), and shocked to see the circumstances to which their former overlords had been reduced in their home country.

The automatic and unthinking affinity between the British diasporic communities and ‘home’ is now largely gone. It addressed a vital nerve centre in the British

identity, one that crucially coupled patricianship abroad to upper-class pretensions and mannerisms at home. The Britain that the British diaspora looked to was dominated by English aspirations and signified by the monarchy, the gentlemen's clubs, the benign feudalism of P. G. Wodehouse's novels, the *Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph* (for the 'intellectuals'), *Punch* and the *Daily Mail* (for the not-so-cerebral), cricket at Lords, Henley, Wimbledon, prep. and boarding schools, and the many other small nuances of dress, vocabulary, accent, manner and recreation that bipolarised the class structure. By signalling their putative association with the English, upper part of that class structure at home, the British abroad were thereby also engaging in the much-venerated, and sometimes deadly serious, pastime of upward social climbing.

The diasporic boundary of British identity, particularly that part powerfully impregnated with class pretensions, is rapidly fading without the sustenance wrought by the intimate connection between the mother country on the one hand and the Empire and dominions on the other. As it used to state on its banner-head, the *Daily Mail* was founded by Harmsworth to proclaim 'The Power, the Supremacy and the Greatness of the British Empire'. Its editorials now rarely rise above crude anti-EU and anti-Labour Party campaigns. *Punch* published its last issue in 1992. The library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, an old watering hole of dominion academics, sold up in the next year.

The echoes of world-wide racial bonding were still evident in the Falklands campaign and in the activation of the British diasporic vote for the Conservative Party in the 1992 general election. But black immigration to the UK, macro-changes in the world situation of Britain and its former dominions and the evolution of the Empire into a multiracial Commonwealth have fragmented the unquestioned nature of the racial boundary of British identity. It is to the non-white Commonwealth frontier that I next turn.

Empire and Commonwealth

Global British economic supremacy in the nineteenth century was not solely based on the export of its population abroad. Mercantilism, then dominance in international free trade, had already given British manufacturers a decisive competitive advantage in key commodities – tobacco, sugar, slaves, cotton and early manufactures.

What is called the 'high' imperialism of the 1870s and 1880s was not so much an economic apotheosis (as Lenin supposed), as an ideological and political one. This was dramatically affirmed by Queen Victoria being accorded the vainglorious title of Empress of India, while the Indian Durbar was indigenised and reconstituted as a home grown Jubilee (P. Anderson 1992: 25).

The Empire functioned, therefore, not only or not even primarily to cement Britain's economic interests: indeed the amount of non-Empire investment in Argentina, the USA and Russia exceeded the total invested in the Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. What empire did was to establish a cultural and national superiority of world-wide proportions: an empire where, truly, the sun never set. The British were the new chosen people. Their assigned task was to conduct a civilising mission at the frontiers of all humanity. They were enjoined to shoulder, in Kipling's famous phrase, 'the white man's burden'.

At first, the British expansionists abroad seemed incapable of rising to Kipling's task – English pirates in the Caribbean seemed almost excessively bloodthirsty; they plundered and stole as well as any Spanish *conquistador* and often engaged in more gratuitous violence. In the Far East, the depredations of the East India Company and the corruption and conspicuous consumption of the Nabobs reached historic heights. With rare exceptions of cultural broad-mindedness, such as that exhibited by

Governor-General Warren Hastings, the Company's officials in India manifested a crude social Darwinism in their treatment of others. As a nineteenth-century correspondent for *The Times* (cited Little 1947: 213) declared:

I must say that I have been struck with the arrogant and repellent manner in which we often treat natives of rank and with the unnecessary harshness of our treatment of inferiors. The most scrubby mean little representative of *la race blanche* . . . regards himself as infinitely superior to the Rajpoot with a genealogy of 1,000 years.

This report is telling also both because of the careful note that there *were* Indians of rank and because of the apparently ingenuous lapse into French – the hidden implication being that it was already somehow shameful for a British person to be exhibiting naked racial sentiments, an explicitness best left to foreigners.

Shameful it may have become, but only because the British in India were given a painful lesson they never forgot. In 1857 what the Indians call the 'Indian National Rising' and the British 'the Mutiny' totally shattered the aplomb of the Company officials. This was a watershed event which ramified throughout colonial administrations for decades. From then on, it was apparent to all, not least the British officials themselves, that an empire could only be maintained by the cultivation of the local élites, the practice of honest government, the bestowing of equal justice and the appearance of non-racialism and non-sectarianism.

In announcing the end of Company rule in India and the immediate commencement of Direct Rule by the Crown, Queen Victoria's Proclamation of November 1857 exactly captured the post-Mutiny spirit:

We hold ourselves bound to the natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to all our subjects, and these obligations, by the Almighty God, we shall faithfully and conscientiously fulfil. . . . We declare it to be our royal will and pleasure that none be in any wise favoured, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal protection of the law (cited Visram 1986: 7).

Like all colonialisms and imperialisms, British expansion abroad attracted its fair share of opprobrium from the nationalist movements, emerging particularly after the Second World War. This criticism was nearly always just. There was arrogance and cruelty, economic exploitation and a supreme indifference to suffering in the name of racial and cultural difference. Social Darwinism gained a new lease of life in Africa where the inhabitants were often conceived of as inferiors, brutes or naive children. And in the privacy of colonial clubs, prejudice and snobbery were rife.

But Queen Victoria's legacy was a powerful and, in the end, a dominant one. Her heritage is still acknowledged in former colonial countries in the reverence for the Indian Civil Service, the continuation of British judicial traditions and the deference paid to the culture of fairness, of equal access to the powerful and the courteous treatment of petitioners. The collapse of many Commonwealth African countries into one-party, no-party or military dictatorships would seem to belie this comment, but all these misfortunes prove is that people often aspire to far more than they achieve. The current movement for democracy in Africa demonstrates the still continuing attraction of the best parts of the colonial legacy. As Goulbourne (1991: 81), a political scientist with extensive experience in Africa and the Caribbean, contends:

. . . in the end the overwhelming majority of new and independent states have been proud to be part of the British Commonwealth of nations. . . . [Through peaceful decolonisation] Britain has retained a paramount status whilst the former colonies have become respected members of the world community of 'nation-states'. In effect, the ex-colonies have been able to transform themselves and display the (British) ability for political compromise. Much goodwill remained (and probably still remains despite what is widely regarded by Commonwealth members as Margaret Thatcher's, paradoxically, non-British behaviour) between Britain and her former colonies.

Goulbourne's observations are pertinent in discussing one of the great counter-factual suppositions of the post-war period. Why did successive British governments not take advantage of the great opportunity offered to transform the prevailing goodwill, as well as the economic, sporting and cultural ties within the Commonwealth, into a powerful, global trading bloc?

Superficially, this would have been a highly attractive possibility. India's market alone is now three times the size of the EU's: its cottons and manufactures are making it into a formidable economic power. The energetic Commonwealth newly industrialising countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong) have virtually rewritten the economic textbooks in being able to sustain high growth rates with minimal natural resources. The old white dominions, a South Africa under majority rule (the African National Congress will rejoin the Commonwealth), a minerals and resource-rich Africa: all this could have made the Commonwealth a global bloc more powerful than the three current contenders – NAFTA, the EU and the Pacific Rim under the hegemony of Japan.

Why did this not happen? One temptation is to attribute failure solely to malice, prejudice or incompetence in Britain. This would be unfair. When the first key turning point arrived, with the impending independence of India, Nehru and others in the Congress Party became suspicious of the British government's motivations, thinking that the Commonwealth could turn into a disguised perpetuation of Empire. A decade later, Nkrumah, then the dominant African nationalist leader, saw 'neocolonialism' as the main danger to Africa. Nearly all the newly emergent independent states of Africa and Asia looked towards a diplomatic future that was more diverse and nonaligned. Only the anglophone Caribbean countries were ideologically committed members of a greater Commonwealth. There too the notion of a Commonwealth citizenship survived for longer – though it finally collapsed in the face of UK indifference and micro-nationalism in the region.

While I argued that the British government should not be *solely* blamed for missing a great historic opportunity, this should not obscure the fact that there was a notable lack of conviction in the future of the Commonwealth in leading ruling circles in the UK. The Foreign Office was dominated by Atlanticists, Europeanists and Arabists. The military umbrella of the Americans, trade with Europe, unimpeded oil supplies from the Middle East – these were the sacred cows dictating foreign policy after 1945.

As with much else in Britain, issues of principle were also clouded by class sentiments. It would not, I think, be too much of an exaggeration to assert that the predominantly upper-class, Oxford-trained, Foreign Office officials despised the boys in khaki shorts and bush-hats from middle-class homes who staffed the Colonial Office. Much of this battle was internal, a silent class struggle, but it was not long before the victors emerged. The Colonial Office was closed as a separate entity, and absorbed (the relationship was too asymmetrical to be called 'merged') into its rival under the name of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Then, at least in popular usage, the embarrassing tail was dropped and the pristine redesignation 'the Foreign Office' emerged supreme.

It is well known that Prime Minister Thatcher had scant regard for the toffs in the Foreign Office, but they were treated with kid gloves compared to the contempt for the Commonwealth she displayed. Perhaps the most memorable incident was when she emerged from a Commonwealth conference in Bermuda with the announcement that she had rejected the demand for increased sanctions against South Africa. Forefinger opposing thumb, she intoned to the world's media that only the 'tiniest, tiniest' sanctions would be accepted by the British government. Not only had the British prime minister flagrantly violated the Commonwealth leaders' convention of 'agreed statements only', she had sent a clear signal to her followers. Decoded, the

message read: 'No bunch of wogs are going to push *me* around; if I want to support the white South Africans, I'll bloody well do it.'

Even if other powerful British decision-makers were not so crude as the redoubtable Mrs Thatcher, the Commonwealth was regarded largely as of sentimental value only. In 1993, the Commonwealth Institute, the flagship building of the organisation in London, could not secure a Foreign Office grant adequate to keep its fabric from rotting away. Few – the Queen herself was a notable exception – saw the possibilities for using the Commonwealth to establish a competitive trading bloc. Instead, *realpolitik* dictated a continuing and enhanced alliance with the USA (Mrs Thatcher, a convinced Atlanticist, vigorously supported this tendency), or a fateful and final commitment to Europe (the line backed by the Foreign Office and most business and financial opinion). It is to the fuzzy frontiers of the USA and Europe that I next turn.

The Atlantic and anglophone connection

From 1820 to 1927 some 37 million migrants arrived in the United States, some 32 million of whom arrived directly from Europe (Power 1979: 10). They came predominantly from Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Austro-Hungary and Italy. The migrants and their descendants rapidly built up the population of the country. In 1800 the US population was only 5.3 million; by 1905 it had reached 105.7 million people (Potts 1990: 131). The newcomers immediately adopted their country of settlement as their own with scant regard to the rights of the native Americans and a certain disdain for settlers of non-European origin.

Although many scholars have rightly questioned the extent to which the newcomers were able or willing to discard their prior ethnic identities, the ideology of Americanisation was none the less powerful enough for the immigrants to assert a collective citizenship. The governing spirit is well captured by the monologue by the pogrom orphan of Israel Zangwill's 1908 hit play, *The Melting Pot*:

America is God's crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! Here you stand . . . in your fifty groups with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries, but you won't be long like that brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to – the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! German and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all. God is making the American (cited Glazer and Moynihan 1963: 289–90).

Perhaps it was divine intervention that fashioned the American, but God seems to have used a mould patented by the Virginia Company of London, whose charter for the 'Habitation and Plantation' of Virginia was granted by James I in 1606. Essentially, the design was that of a dominion society in the analytical sense I have outlined earlier. This was evidenced in the charter by the insistence that the king's subjects who settled in the colony *and* their offspring were to retain their 'Liberties, Franchises and Immunities, with any of our other Dominions, to all Intents and Purposes, as if they had been abiding and born within this our Realm of England' (cited Ringer 1983: 39).

As Ringer shows elsewhere in his account, the English created a society in the New World which was predicated on their racial, religious, national and linguistic heritage. In the Declaration of Independence, in the Constitution, in the processes that transformed the thirteen original colonies into a federated nation-state, the notion of 'We, the People' constituted an undisguised colonial presumption, an ethno-national putsch. For 'the People' were none other than the English settlers. The true First Nations, the native inhabitants (misleadingly labelled 'Indians' by Columbus, who thought America was India) were treated with violence, force or fraud. Africans were

dehumanised and enslaved.

As the nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass immigration to the USA shifted the white ethnic balance from English to British, from British to northern European, from northern European to southern European, it became increasingly difficult for the English to maintain an unchallenged hegemony. Moreover, as historians of Hispanic America (for example, Samora and Simon 1977) have reminded us, a large part of the history of the USA consisted of the movement of Hispanic peoples into the southwest and did not simply comprise the settlement of the eastern seaboard and its subsequent westward expansion.

Despite this felicitous corrective, it is remarkable none the less how dominant the institutions developed by the English settlers remained. Cohort after cohort of bemused eastern and southern Europeans wrestled with the English language at night schools supported by public grants. (Leo Rosten's comic sketch, *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, provides a hilariously painful account of the encounter between a Jewish immigrant and his English teacher.) Henry Ford employed sociologists and social workers to habituate and anglicise his workers. The courts, public education, the acknowledgement of the dominance of WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) in the status hierarchy, the desperate genealogical searches for respectable English ancestors – all this signified the continuing potency of English colonisation. In a number of the snob 'Ivy League' universities, Jews and blacks were excluded from teaching appointments until the 1950s and 1960s.

The Boston Tea Party signalled the end of British political domination in the USA, but the frontier of identity derived from the dominance of the English language, together with the many institutions bequeathed by the English settlement, have left an indelible mark.

The English language itself was crucial to the continuing vitality of this frontier. Britain's nineteenth-century imperial mission and the twentieth-century corporate global reach of the USA have both been expressed in a tenaciously monoglot English. I accept, of course, that American English has now diverged considerably from BBC English – why else would Churchill utter his well-known aphorism that Britain and the USA were 'two countries divided by a common language'? However, this did not prevent 'the greatest living Englishman' from communicating with his American mother, just as the British manage to interact with American guests, tourists, politicians, generals, traders, bankers and industrialists. This ease of communication and the historic links between a former dominion society and its motherland largely account for the so-called 'special relationship' between the USA and the UK.

The fact that the English language has been made so dominant by Britain in the last century and the USA in the current century, has forced even powerful national actors – the Germans, the Japanese, the French, the Spanish and the Italians – on to the defensive. Despite their claims none of their languages, with the possible exception of Spanish, has the status of a world language: increasingly international commerce, law, business and (to the *chagrin* of the French) diplomacy, are conducted in English. In order to ensure fluency in the emergent global *lingua franca*, smaller nations like the Dutch are actively considering abolishing teaching in Dutch in the universities in favour of English.

The adoption of the English language and the continuing relevance of the British colonial period in US institutions and in its status order, has given to the British identity an ego injection of considerable potency. It would show utter naiveté for any British government to believe that US administrations do not act solely on behalf of

the USA's own interests. The USA was reluctant to get into the Second World War and only did so when its Pacific claims were immediately threatened, Eden's colonial adventure at Suez was denounced by the USA, George Bush quickly saw that the German government was the pivotal actor in Europe, not Whitehall. But despite these fallouts and the challenge from recent ideologies of multiculturalism, a cousin-hood between the British and many Americans remains: a fuzzy frontier somewhere between a self-hood and an other-hood.

As to the future of the English language, linguists propose two possible outcomes. The first is the Latin analogy, where languages of a common origin localise and become mutually unintelligible Creoles. The second can be called 'the amoeba scenario', with a comprehensible English spreading to all who are enmeshed in the nexus of an international society, polity, culture and economy. Without having the professional qualifications to assert this with certainty, I suspect the second outcome is far more likely. Major powers (the pre-1989 Soviet Union, China) were already constrained to run English-language radio stations to get their message across. Equally, travel and tourism, the electronic and printed media, software packages and instruction booklets – all are overwhelmingly dominated by the English language.

A curious disjuncture then arises: i.e. Britain's linguistic centrality gives to it the status of a fountainhead of primary, global significance. On the other hand the most expressive and ambitious uses of the English language are shifting outside England. (It is rare, for example, for an English-born writer to win the prestigious Booker literary prize.) Equally Britain's industrial and commercial strengths place it a little lower than halfway down the list of major industrial countries.⁴ Put another way, Britain's international purchasing power is considerably lower than its communication power. Could this be the underlying reason why Britons abroad have to speak English a little louder when they are not clearly understood?

Britain in Europe

'Foreigners start at Calais' goes the blunt slogan of British and English nativism. This insular sentiment has indeed made a lasting impression on the continent of Europe. The British are seen by many on the continent – in political circles, in the continental media and in the popular consciousness – as reluctant Europeans, stubbornly monolingual, still tied to the dreams of Empire and to the apron strings of the USA.

The continental politician who expressed this most openly was Charles de Gaulle, who was implacably opposed to Britain joining the EEC. This opposition was predicated on a clear national interest – the Franco-German alliance neatly protected German industry in exchange for the subsidisation of French agriculture. But de Gaulle's opposition was also based on a principled vision of Europe – a zone of peace, a bloc between the blocs and, in particular, the bonding of a set of countries that did not have to depend on the goodwill of the USA. For him, admitting the UK to the European club was as foolish as the Trojans breaking down their city walls to admit the wooden horse of the Athenians.

It is difficult, in retrospect, to fault de Gaulle's logic. At the industrial level, much indigenous UK manufacturing capital has collapsed, been switched to third countries or to speculative punting in the City. Inward manufacturing investment to the UK came mainly from the USA and Japan, countries anxious to establish an export platform in Europe. One can perhaps understand the apprehensions and anger of the French or Italian car manufacturers and buyers when they are confronted with 'transplant' factories in the UK like Ford (always owned by Ford USA), Vauxhall (acquired by General Motors in the 1970s), Jaguar (purchased by Ford in the 1980s), and the Honda-Rover partnership (now challenged by Germany through BMW's

majority stake in the company announced in January 1994). The direct transplants, Nissan and Toyota, are likely to be major players in the European market. Even if the Volkswagens, Fiats, Peugeots and Renaults compare favourably and sometimes compete successfully in the British and continental markets, by encouraging the development of the 'transplants', British industrial policy seems to have frustrated the very purpose of the original EEC, i.e. to create a trading bloc excluding Japan and the USA.

In respect of monetary policy, social policy, defence postures and immigration matters, Britain is also frequently in a minority of one. Indeed, for about a decade the UK government's posture was reminiscent of the proud mother's comment while she watches a military parade: 'All out of step but my Jimmie,' she boasts. While space forbids a full analysis of the British position on European issues, a few comments on the broad differences between the postures of 'the 11 plus the 1',⁵ will be illustrative:

- By defending an anachronistic role for sterling and showing a lack of interest in a common European currency, the current British administration has secured some immediate flexibility in *monetary policy*, but has lost any prospect of long-term support from the key continental central banks and was forced to accept that the new European bank would be located in Frankfurt rather than in the City.
- Britain's opposition to European *social policy* includes the principled position that British workers should be free to work more than 48 hours a week, a notion that the '11' think smacks of the nineteenth century. In so far as they can attribute rationality to the British government's hostility to the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, they assume it is to continue to cheapen the costs of British labour to attract further non-EU investment.
- In its *defence policy*, Britain is trying to buttress the North American Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Western European Union (whose Standing Armaments Committee is tied closely into NATO) against Franco-German plans to set up an independent European command structure. In other words, the British government is doing just what de Gaulle predicted by refusing to co-operate in setting up a European army command. In frustration, the German and French governments have set up a small joint force.
- The foreign secretary (and former home secretary), Douglas Hurd, has made repeated statements that Britain's *immigration policy* will include the mounting of independent immigration checks on other EU nationals (excluding, as mentioned earlier, Eire citizens). The reason advanced for this flagrant violation of its treaty obligations was that Britain 'is an island'. This *non sequitur* is an unusually clear example of mystagogy that the '11' cannot penetrate.

Only in the matter of political union has Britain found itself joined by a somewhat unexpected ally, Denmark, whose electorate narrowly voted against the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum in mid-1992. Prior to this boost for those in Britain who oppose the political union of Europe, the British debate confusingly centred on the forbidden 'F-word', 'federalism', which a number of UK politicians and the popular media suggested meant the fusion of all power in Brussels. In fact, as any political science textbook, dictionary or encyclopaedia will reveal, federalism means the exact opposite – namely, the distribution of specified constitutional powers to national and regional governments and the co-operative pooling of certain powers at the centre. What the Danish referendum result has at last clarified is a debate on how much power is to be pooled and how much is to be retained and reserved at the national level.

Before 1993, the UK government had simply not been 'talking the same language' as many on the continent. Ironically, this problem was more acute in the figurative than in the literal sense. The '11' rushed to their dictionaries in an attempt to comprehend the British government's position on federalism and political union, but to no avail. For although the UK government may have disliked the *reality* of the

sharing of power somewhat, it has had to accommodate to that harsh condition for many years. (The UK's defence policy, for example, has been predicated on American military power since 1943.) What the '11' were slow to appreciate is that the UK government's most profound fears centred on the loss of *the appearance* of power.⁶ After many nods and winks during the course of 1991–92, the '11' finally got the message and left the dreaded F-word (which did not mean what the British thought it meant, but if they thought it meant that, then ...) out of the Treaty of Maastricht. The substance of the Treaty changed not one whit, but Prime Minister Major was able to claim a victory for British 'common sense' – or should that be mystagogy.

The appearance of Denmark as an unexpected ally in the anti-Maastricht cause broke the neat asymmetry between the UK government and its continental counterparts. Where the major continental governments wanted to consolidate the EU around the existing core plus a few additional members, others, including the UK, want to add a substantial number of other members, the better to dilute the common enterprise and the effectiveness of Brussels. With the French franc under pressure and Germany preoccupied with reunification, the cement between these two core members is beginning to crack. The ratification of the Maastricht Treaty secured only narrow support in Germany and France while the most likely new members of the club, Finland, Austria, Norway and Sweden, all seemed to be closer to the British position in favouring very restricted powers for Brussels. Moreover, there have been strong disagreements over foreign policy, with the Greeks, for example, being strongly opposed to NATO intervention in Bosnia. Unfortunately, the support Britain seemed to be receiving from the new entrants withered in the spring of 1994, as the UK government held simultaneously to the view that it was right to enlarge the community, but not at the expense of Britain blocking powers over new legislation. This left no room to *provide* votes for the aspiring members; so some natural 'northern European' allies were carelessly alienated.

The imminent enlargement of the Union and other shifts in national interest have led to much more complex internal relations within the EU, but this should not disguise the broad contrast in political styles and language that still remains. The continental predilection for precision contrasts with the British preference for political intuition. The '11' want transparency, openness, explicitness, legally binding and enforceable obligations, the '1' wants opacity, impenetrability, imperviousness and vague 'understandings'. So potent are these differences, that even after two decades of membership of the EEC and its successor bodies an old dilemma can still be posed. Can the British ever become Europeans? Can the gulf of mutual incomprehension allow enough points of access and permeability for a British identity to become subsumed in a wider European identity? No definitive answer to these questions is yet possible.

On the one hand, the slow drip-feed of European integration is influencing the younger generation – who increasingly study, work, travel and holiday on the continent and who forget their kith and kin abroad, deride the British Empire and neglect the idealistic notion of a multiracial Commonwealth. The USA is still culturally hegemonic at the level of popular music, cinema, television series and Mickey Mouse artefacts – but the attractions of Rome, Barcelona, Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris are ever more alluring. The sense of style and design, the drugs scene, football, several kinds of music, architecture, popular philosophy, fast hatchbacks, ski resorts and beach culture – all these aspects of British youth culture are incrementally drawn as much from European as American models.

On the other hand, the older British generation – in particular those with wealth and power – are culturally resistant to the European idea and find few inspiring or ideologically-compelling reasons for 'being there'.⁷ That is not to argue that there are

not recognised *instrumental* reasons for having joined the European club. Businessmen want to sell in the wider market; the middle classes now have an excellent choice of pâtés, soft cheeses, sausages and yoghurts in their local branch of the famous supermarket chain, Sainsburys; it is easier to travel and to buy a second home in the European sun.

The Queen was not allowed to address the European parliament in Strasbourg during Mrs Thatcher's terms of prime ministerial office. When she finally did so, in May 1992, she managed to draw some inspiration from Churchill's celebration of the richness and vitality of Europe's achievements in the arts, culture and science and its need to avoid the succession of self-destructive conflicts which had scarred the history of the continent. Europe, she argued, if somewhat loftily, could be a force for civilisation and tolerance in the world.

It may be that Britain can still make its distinctive contribution to this vision of the future. But, at least so far, mean-spirited materialist and instrumental messages have drowned out any compelling and principled reason for Britain's membership. This is in notable contrast to the prior frontiers explored by the British. The shouldering of the white man's burden may have been both a paternalistic and self-assigned task, but it provided an ideologically sustaining reason for British expansion. Establishing dominions abroad may have been an arrogant putsch against the indigenous nations, but British political ideas and institutions undoubtedly spread the practice of liberty, representation and equal justice. The notion of a world association of black, brown, yellow and white peoples, which underlay the design of the post-1947 Commonwealth was perhaps the most utopian, but sadly the most underdeveloped, vision of all.

By being largely unable to articulate any uplifting reasons for being in Europe, successive British governments have enfeebled the frontiers of British identity at precisely its most vulnerable points. Instead of drawing lessons from the multiracial Commonwealth, the British are in danger of catching a resurgent racial virus from Germany and France. Instead of broadcasting Queen Victoria's message of religious tolerance, the British are in danger of accepting a narrow religious zealotry which isolates Muslims from Europeans in a demonology as outdated as the Holy Roman Empire. Instead of celebrating the real successes of the initiatives towards racial equality in Britain (the work of the Commission for Racial Equality, the Race Equality Councils, the anti-racist movements), the British government seeks only to outbid the '11' in its fervour to exclude non-white third-country nationals from the EU.

The net result of this failure to articulate any ethical reasons for being in Europe is that the British remain uneasy Europeans – uncertain of what good they are contributing to the common purpose. For the younger generation, there are signs of a creative European cultural syncretism – which might ultimately generate a 'new wave' at the level of the plastic, visual or performing arts and even in literary and intellectual life. But little of this capacity inheres in the older and wealthier generation, whose core identity remains locked in a problematic, antipathetic and largely unworthy interface with the European frontier.

The construction of 'the Alien'

The sixth and final frontier I consider is one which separates the British most firmly from the rest of humankind. I refer to the invention and sustenance of that chilling

extraterrestrial category, 'the alien'. Unlike the five frontiers previously discussed (the Celtic, the Dominion, the Commonwealth, the Atlantic and the European), there is a much greater interest by the frontier guards in clarifying and defining the alien boundary: to move, in other words, from a fuzzy to a more unequivocal frontier.

Whereas the ambiguities along the edges of the first five frontiers have the advantage of allowing the manipulation of the identity-construct and the exercise of discretion by the frontier guards through personal privilege, loose understandings and favours, the hardening of the alien frontier is necessary to express any permanent sense of belonging to a British identity. It is also the frontier most vulnerable to politicisation by populist, racist and xenophobic elements.

Despite the interests of the frontier guards and the extreme political sensitivity of the alien frontier, precise boundary definitions have remained elusive. As Cunningham (1969: 3) suggested as early as 1897, it was not always clear who constituted an 'alien':

So many diverse tribes and stocks have contributed to the formation of the English nation, that it is not always easy to draw a line between the native and foreign elements. . . . It seems a little arbitrary to fix on any definite date and designate the immigrants of earlier times, component parts of the English race, while we speak of later arrivals as aliens.

Although at various times nativist movements have opposed Cunningham's point and sought to proclaim the homogeneity of the currently-constituted English nation, such a notion has always attracted its fair share of critics and satirists. Take, for example, this poem in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1909 (cited Landa 1911: 2):

The Paleolithic, Stone and Bronze Age races
The Celt, the Roman, Teutons not a few
Diverse in dialects and hair and faces –
The Fleming, Dutchman, Huguenot and Jew
'Tis hard to prove by means authoritative
Which is the alien and which the native.

That making a rigorous distinction between alien and native was difficult did not, of course, mean that it was not attempted in social and political practice. Who constitutes the self (the acceptable, the insider, the familial), and who the other (the stranger, the outsider, the alien) is the warp and woof of all British migration history and the basic ingredient of a British identity. How the British-alien frontier was shaped is discussed in my forthcoming book.

Conclusion

It is time to draw the threads of my argument together. British identity shows a general pattern of fragmentation. Multiple axes of identification have meant that Irish, Scots, Welsh and English people, those from the white, black or brown Commonwealth, Americans, English-speakers, Europeans and even 'aliens' have had their lives intersect one with another in overlapping and complex circles of identity-construction and rejection. The shape and edges of British identity are thus historically changing, often vague and, to a degree, malleable – an aspect of the British identity I have called 'a fuzzy frontier'.

With the advent of post-war immigration from the black and Asian Commonwealth, it became more difficult for white Britons to territorialise their identity to the exclusion of 'the other'. Nationality and citizenship, despite various cunning bureaucratic and political contrivances, had to be conceded on a non-racial basis. It is

notable that younger members of the ethnic minorities assertively describe themselves as ‘black British’ or ‘Asian British’. Events in the dominions and the signing of the Treaty of Rome also rent a giant tear across the notion of an exclusively racially defined British people, at home and in the diaspora. At the same time, their attachment to a new European frontier left many Britons, particularly older Britons, in an uneasy state of ‘not belonging’.

I have suggested that the important global role of the English language has an ego-sustaining function for the British and is tantalisingly redolent of their country’s nineteenth-century world dominance. At the same time, the disjuncture between real and imagined power, creates a dangerous gap in the identity frontier’s defences. This gap may well be closed by attitudes of extreme hostility and xenophobia to those who are deemed undesirable aliens, undeserving asylum-seekers or unassimilable religious and racial minorities.

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Notes

- 1 The theme is pursued at length in my forthcoming book.
- 2 English rather than British here, as the sporting traditions of the Celtic fringe diverge radically. The Gaelic Athletic Association, for example, banned all non-indigenous games from 1887. Holt (1990) maintained that sport provided the crucial function of promoting loyalty to the Empire by colonial whites (and also by native élites). Cricket, athletics and rugby – the sports of the *English* public schools – were vigorously promoted in the Empire and Dominions. (Football was too ‘working-class’.) Partly because of the presence of non-British whites, the French Canadians, these sports did not ‘catch on’ in Canada. On the other hand, despite John Buchan’s disparaging remark that the Afrikaners of South Africa ‘were not a sporting race’, the Boers took to rugby with such avidity and determination that the mauling scrum became a crucial ritual through which their deep resentment against the British was expressed.
- 3 In his Conservative Political Centre pamphlet published seven years later, William Deedes (1968: 10), a minister without portfolio in 1961, explicitly admitted: ‘The Bill’s real purpose was to restrict the influx of coloured immigrants. We were reluctant to say as much openly. So the restrictions were applied to coloured and white citizens in all Commonwealth countries – though everybody recognised that immigration from Canada, Australia and New Zealand formed no part of the problem.’ Deedes’s racially tinted glasses saw dominion immigration as ‘no part of the problem’ even though in the early 1960s the total number of migrants admitted and embarked and the total number of immigration ‘evasions’ were greater for the three old dominions named than for the rest of the Commonwealth combined (Patterson 1969: 31–5).
- 4 Using conventional economic measures, the 1992 figures issued by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development showed the UK ranking as tenth out of the OECD’s membership of eighteen. More complex measures are provided in the 1992 *World Competitiveness Report* produced by the World Economic Forum (together with a Lausanne-based management school). In the overall ranking the UK came thirteenth out of twenty-two. These scores simply confirm the long-term relative decline of the UK noticed by economic historians, most of whom would date the start of this process to about 1900–1910. Fierce political discussion in Britain continues as to which administration, Tory or Labour, has delivered, or is likely to produce, a better growth rate. In fact, over the long term, there is little evidence to suggest that the mediocre performance of the economy varies greatly with either party.
- 5 I understand this was, at first, Jacques Delors’s private phrase. *The Sun* showed its unerring grossness and lack of diplomatic sense by running a sustained nativist ‘Up Yours, Delors’ campaign in 1991/2. This, *inter alia*, featured a rally of readers at Trafalgar Square and an immense front-page photograph showing two ‘patriotic’ British fingers splayed in the ‘fuck you’ position. During 1991 and early 1992 the ‘11 plus 1’ phrase was commonly used in European meetings as a gentle, but ironic, comment on the characteristic British posture on European policies. However, the anti-Maastricht referendum in Denmark and the narrow pro-vote in France dented the self-confidence of the ‘Eurocrats’ considerably. ‘10 plus 2’ did not sound quite so auspicious a calculation, and the plans for a European Union were nearly scuppered.
- 6 Crucial to this pretence is the illusion of sovereignty. This has two major dimensions: (a) *Military independence*. Successive UK governments, for example, held grimly on to the fiction that the UK had an independent nuclear deterrent, when its use was utterly conditional on Washington’s assent; (b) *Parliamentary sovereignty*. This absurd notion was propagated by an English scholar, Albert Venn Dicey, whose views generations of ‘Politics’ and ‘Government’ students (like ‘social science’, the expression ‘political science’ is taboo) were expected to regurgitate. I nearly gagged in the attempt. It therefore comes as a considerable personal relief to learn through Mount’s book (1992) that Dicey was a classifiable lunatic. His sovereignty-mania and ideas of absolute omnipotence for parliament were inversions of his own fear and impotence. As Nairn (1992: 27) comments, Dicey’s psychopathology may have been taken to the British political élite’s hearts precisely because ‘it intuited something analogous about Great Britain. A multi-national state with no armature of reason depended on unchallengeable faith and doses of symbolism (like the monarchy)’.
- 7 The contrast I make between young and old Britons was confirmed by a poll commissioned by the weekly newspaper, the *European* (25–8 June, 1992). When asked if they would vote ‘yes’ to the Treaty of Maastricht if accorded a referendum, the spread between the young (18–34) in Britain and the population at large was 8 points, the greatest in Europe. UK voters as a whole would have voted against the treaty – all other countries but Denmark suggested large majorities ‘for’. But there were fewer committed opponents of the EU in the young UK sample (20 per cent), compared to 30 per cent in the total population. Again this sharp difference was not found in any other EU country.