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**What is
Englishness?**



Englishness and the pattern of things to come

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Opinion – Thought Piece: Englishness and the pattern of things to come

What is Englishness?

Although it is difficult to disentangle Englishness from Britishness, particularly in an historical context, what has become clear more recently is that we find ourselves in an historic moment. We are at a point when the English are beginning to discover a clear conception about a distinction between England and Britain, Englishness and Britishness, even if this choice has been impelled rather unwillingly in many quarters upon the English through the culmination of a variety of factors and events.

National identity is always contested and challenged yet, ongoing processes such as globalisation, increased levels of migration and economic instability but more recent and pressing matters such as increased devolution, Brexit and also the almost complete abandonment of Britishness by the English as a primary identity has irrevocably changed the parameters of the debate.

In an era of an ongoing process of a break-up of Britain, England has become exposed both politically and in terms of identity, and is forced to come to terms with this position of unpreparedness. Yet this debate and national conversation has become dominated by exclusionary and



divisive rhetoric and discourse dominated by a sense of English grievance, loss and anxiety.

It is possible to suggest that there has never been such interest, debate, discussion and ultimately confusion over what it means to be English, or rather a post-British sense of English national identity.

England is in the midst of a crisis of political, social and cultural identity. Lost in this conjuncture seems to be that identity, particularly a sense of national identity is something that is created and constructed not empirically given.

As Stuart Hall commented in 1997, “everywhere, the question of Englishness is in contention” ([Hall, 1997:178](#)).

The English question, especially in light of recent developments is an issue that can no longer go unanswered. Within this context, a post-Scottish independence referendum, post-European referendum, post-end-of-multiculturalism ([David Cameron's Munich declaration in 2011](#)), post-UKIP ideological terrain of social commentary and national imagining, national discourses have hardened

and have become receptive to politics of exclusion, a sense of loss and political incorrectness. Indeed, a conservative dominated national discourse around concepts of Englishness are built, supported and perpetuated within such an environment.

The creation, belief and dominance of this form of Englishness can be viewed as a means to systematically rationalise and come-to-terms, in a self-serving form of coherence, with what it means to identify as English and how and where this is situated in the context of present challenges.

This process also enables a vernacular of 'injured Englishness' acting as a vehicle for a shift towards a more ethno-nationalist identity of disaffection and resentment.

It can be suggested that perceptions and conceptualisations of a sense of Englishness in the contemporary era are dominated by a conservative approach and discursive articulation.

That developments and challenges to **the British nation state** such as devolution, debates around Europe, ongoing processes of multiculturalism and immigration and a wider context of globalisation have become dominated by a conservative response and narrative. These have exposed and problematised conceptual definitions of England, English national identity and Englishness more than ever before.

The culmination of such factors has made the question of Englishness unavoidable, immediate, confusing,

contested and overtly ideologically motivated.

Concepts of Englishness are arguably dominated by a conservative approach on the topic, politically but also culturally and socially feeding upon a narrative of anxiety, fear, grievance, negativity and defensiveness. In this regard, Englishness operates as a reactionary defence mechanism against uncertainty.

England has become dominated by a very tangible form of conservatism, not just in the realm of personal identification and national imagining but also politically such as; a vote to leave the EU which was most notable within England, an overwhelming dominance of Conservative MPs within England, the rise of UKIP and its deep incursions into traditional Labour heartlands, and its effect upon wider political discussion.



Coupled with this is the fundamental split of the UK along political and ideological grounds with the SNP constituting an overwhelmingly dominant position within Scotland whilst the Conservative Party maintain a similar position in England.

Arguably Englishness has become discursively dominated by social and political conservatism.

Dominant conservative concepts of Englishness can be characterised by an archaic and backwards looking position driven by a decline in a primacy of Britishness, yet tentatively opposed to the break-up of Britain, motivated by a deep-seated Euroscepticism and driven on by cultural and social reactionism.

It creates an inextricable link between the intersectionality of conservative positions towards key contemporary themes of devolution, Europe, immigration, multiculturalism and dominant discourses of Englishness whereby exceptionalism and separateness has become naturalised and normalised to the point that it is almost impossible to reimagine it any other way.



It can be argued that there are no objective or natural national identities

but instead, “symbolic demarcation lines” ([Balibar, 2002:52](#)) which are ideologically managed to provide a dominant sense of what England is and what Englishness means.

A dominant conservative discourse of Englishness has become the middle ground of identities within England and dominates a taken-for-granted and illusionary, ‘common sense’ position.

It also takes the position of an assumed empirical and objective view of society, politics and discursive concepts of Englishness.

Arguably, England or Englishness has largely become positioned as a political and cultural reactionary response to conceptions of Britishness; associated with notions of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and outwardly directed civic and cultural values of inclusion. In other words, Britishness can be viewed relatively as far more receptive to a differentiated population whereas Englishness, through a conservative dominated discourse has become far more exclusive.

The paradox being that England is a very multicultural and pluralist society of immense and longstanding diversity. It has nevertheless become dominated by an introverted, negative and reactionary conservative discourse.

As Stuart Hall suggested, “we only know what it means to be ‘English’ because of the way ‘Englishness’ has come to be represented, as a set of meanings” ([Hall, 1995](#)). Indeed, to identify with being English instead of

British (as research suggests the majority of English now do) is to imagine oneself metaphorically as there is nothing natural or genetic about this categorisation. It is a cultural, social and political process which becomes part of our essential narratives and natures.

What we have witnessed in recent years is an increasing conservative political and discursive dominance manifested through policy and political direction such as Brexit, [EVEL](#) (English votes for English laws) and the maintenance of immigration being top of the national agenda. It is also an identity based around conservative and traditionalist themes as a 'taken for granted' position or middle ground.

Sites of contestation have aligned to provide an overwhelming emphasis and urgency to [the English question](#) which can be viewed and characterised by a negative and resentful atmosphere.

This emphasis is not just towards the normative character of pushing the [West Lothian question](#) into the political long grass but a more specifically English oriented, separated and inward-looking social, cultural and political outlook, one that has witnessed an exit from multi-national associations such as the EU and an increasing indifference and barely concealed antagonism toward Scotland.

In this regard, Englishness has become defined by a disaffected and negative attitude towards both the UK and the EU.

Far more English now identify as English (like fellow Scots or Welsh) over British. In fact, the [2011 national census](#) showed that 67% of English primarily identified as English as opposed to 27% who [primarily identified as British \(ONS, 2015\)](#). Indeed, there exists a uni-directional relationship between a declining appeal of Britishness and a similarly growing attachment and dominance of Englishness.



The indifference that once held sway over English national identity has begun to evaporate. The also once long-standing interchangeability between England and Britain in terms of identity and political unity is now at an end and instead a conscious sense of what England is, its place, position and purpose, separate from Britain, is now both acute and necessary.

The English, being the architects and strongest defenders of the Union [of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland] have now all but officially given up on the British project. This was demonstrated by the ease with which English Votes for English Laws was passed through the House of Commons in the summer of 2015. Both politically, and in terms of the identity of Englishness, has, for the English, taken precedent.

Competing ideological expressions of Englishness becomes associated with specific identity politics, for example- it overwhelmingly equates to a deeply Eurosceptic position.

This can be viewed as being articulated through 80% of those identifying exclusively as English voting to Leave the EU, whilst [80% of those voting to Remain identified as being British \(Lewis, 2016\)](#).

In reaction to a closely fought Scottish independence campaign, a defensive yet assertive sense of Englishness translates into the world of Westminster politics. Again, the example of EVEL and the relative ease and speed with which it was passed in the summer of 2015, where up until very recently even the very concept of EVEL existed only on the periphery of British, yet more specifically English politics. This can be seen as indicative of the rapid politicised emergence of Englishness on to the agenda.



It can be suggested that England has become a prisoner to a narrow, unreflective and reflexive political, social and cultural understanding and narrative that dominates our interpretation of national identity, purpose and direction. Indeed, our

understandings of a perceived sense of reality and the period in which we live are manipulated and directed through a specific conservative discursive interpretation and articulation.

This directly affects, in a very macro sense, how we conceive of ourselves, others and who 'we' are and who 'we' are not.

Within this process we form a specific narrative understanding which operates as a mechanism for conceptualising the world, ourselves and our society. However, it is not defined by a logical, rational or representative state of being. In fact it is quite the opposite. It has become the casual and almost unquestioned acceptance of a very specific ideological position.

To a large extent conservative discourses of Englishness can be viewed as being informed by an anxiety of loss; a loss of empire, global position but also an anxiety of a sense of powerlessness in relation to a wider process of globalisation. This is a process which includes processes of ongoing migration, a perceived blurring of cultural boundaries and economic uncertainty. In this sense Englishness has become reimagined within and in relation to a series of contemporary and longer running processes and developments.

Englishness provides an ideological narrative through an essentialisation of culture, geography, history and a sense of mythical nostalgia within a popular imagination.

In many ways a resurgent concept of Englishness dominated by a conservative discursive account can be viewed as operating as a reterritorialisation of a long dominant sense of English national identity.

We can expect further dramatic impact(s) upon policy direction and political articulation and national narrative in future.

Indeed, the confused, fluid and hastily improvised nature of the impact of Englishness, particularly upon politics, has come as a surprise to many, yet it has arguably set a precedent for future patterns.

The Conservatives, the very party defined by Unionism, have all but undermined and destroyed the union through the harnessing and exploitation of a resurgence of English nationalism and resentment. This is politically and ideologically manifested through either the passing of English Votes for English Laws, the decision to leave the EU or a more general exploitation of a defensive and traditionalist sense of Englishness that has identified and appealed to a palpable sense of grievance, anxiety and fear.

The rapid politicised emergence of Englishness, characterised by a sense of grievance and assertiveness, needs to be taken very seriously for its far wider implications, whether we are willing volunteers or not.

Stuart Cartland, October 2016

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