Defining British National Identity

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The so-called ‘problem of British national identity’ has been a subject of agonised debate in Britain since the early 1960s, triggered off initially by the loss of empire, then by the rise of the welfare state, postwar black and Asian migration and entry into the European Community, and more recently by the devolution of power to Scotland and Wales. Although the debate has been fascinating, it has often tended to avoid large questions, such as what we mean by national identity, why we need a coherent view of it, whether it might not become a vehicle of authoritarian cultural engineering and illiberal politics, where the national identity is to be located, and how we can resolve the inevitable differences about shared values, common political goals, visions of British society and views of British history that lie at the heart of national identity. In this article I shall step back from the actual debate, address these and other questions that it has taken for granted, and suggest how the debate might more profitably proceed.

Personal and national identity

The term ‘identity’ is of relatively recent origin. Its cognate ‘national identity’ is even more recent and seems to go back no further than the 1950s, when it replaced such earlier terms as ‘national character’, ‘national soul’ and ‘national genius’. The term ‘identity’ primarily refers to individuals and is analogically extended to human collectivities including nation-states. It would therefore be useful to begin with a brief discussion of individual or personal identity.

To ask what is our identity as individuals is to ask what defines us or makes us the kind of persons we are and distinguishes us from others. As individuals we possess countless attributes and qualities and stand in a host of relationships with others. Some of these attributes and relationships are contingent and transient, whereas others are central and tenacious and shape us profoundly. The fact that we are golfers or members of a particular club is a contingent fact of our lives; we would not become altogether different persons if we ceased being either. By contrast our humanity, gender, culture, religion, values, moral commitments, dominant passions, psychological and moral dispositions, and so forth are constitutive of us in the sense that we either cannot abandon them at all or cannot do so without becoming different kinds of persons. Since they constitute us, they are an integral part of us, making it almost impossible to define ourselves independently of them. This is not to say that some or many of these characteristics and relationships do not change over time, for as reflective and self-determining agents we can and do redefine and change ourselves, but rather that when they do, we ourselves change, however imperceptibly, and recognise ourselves as different from what we were before.

Identity refers to those features and relationships that are constitutive of us and define and distinguish us as certain kinds of persons. We are necessarily the products of countless influences. Some go back to our childhood and are largely unknown to us, and many others operate so surreptitiously and unconsciously that we can become aware of them only after a
most rigorous self-analysis. A part of our identity thus always remains a mystery to us, and we are constantly surprised by what we say and do. It also contains large areas of ambiguity, contradiction and fluidity, and we can never fashion ourselves into entirely coherent and transparent wholes. Our identity is neither fixed and unalterable nor wholly fluid and amenable to unlimited reconstruction. We can alter it, but only within the constraints imposed by our inherited constitution and necessarily inadequate self-knowledge. Since our identity evolves over time and is often marked by several identifiable turning points, it has an inescapable historical dimension and is best told in the form of a story or a narrative of how we came to be who and what we are.

Although identity is closely related to difference, the two are not the same, and much confusion is created by conflating them. Obviously, to know who I am is also to know who I am not and how I differ from others. And since the need to define my identity arises partly because I wish to distinguish myself from others, every statement of identity is also a statement of difference. However, it is wrong to suggest that my identity consists in my difference from others. I differ from them because I am already constituted in a certain way, not the other way round. My differences from them are derivative from and not constitutive of my identity. If others became like me, my differences from them would diminish, but it would be absurd to say that my identity has changed, for it is they who have changed and not I. In order to preserve my identity, all that is necessary is that I should remain true to what I take to be central to it. I do not need to struggle to remain different from others at all cost, both because this has no bearing on my identity and because others then determine my identity and undermine my autonomy.

Identity is not always a matter of pride. As we discover who we are, we might not like some or even most aspects of it. We might find that we harbour deep sexist, racist and other prejudices, or that we are mean, jealous, greedy and unable to respond to others’ achievements in a spirit of generosity. We then feel ashamed of ourselves, and even of our culture which encouraged these prejudices and moral traits in us, and explore ways of reconstructing and reforming ourselves. It is rare for an individual to be wholly proud or totally ashamed of his identity; the former breeds narcissism, the latter self-hatred, and both alike are recipes for psychological and moral disintegration.

For the most part we are both content with and critical of our identity in different degrees. To say ‘this is my identity’ is not to say that this is how I wish to or should remain for ever, for I need to ask if I am happy with it and approve of what it entails. Just as I can evaluate my identity, so can others. While my identity deserves their respect, the respect cannot be uncritical, for they might legitimately question and even refuse to respect some aspects of it.

In the light of our discussion it would be helpful to draw a threefold distinction between identity or inherited constitution, self-understanding or self-knowledge, and self-conception or self-evaluation. Identity refers to the way we are constituted, including the totality of passions, fears, hopes, aspirations and the residues of countless past influences that form part of us and make us a certain kind of person. Self-understanding refers to the way we understand ourselves and is a product of our attempts to make some sense of ourselves. Self-conception is parasitic upon self-understanding, and refers to our critical assessment of who we think we are and what we wish to make of ourselves. Identity refers to who we really are, self-understanding to who we think we are, and self-conception to what we would like to be. The three are dialectically related, and both shape and are shaped by each other.
In the light of what I have said about personal identity, it is relatively easy to see what national identity is. National identity is the identity of a political community and refers to the kind of community it is, its central values and commitments, its characteristic ways of talking about and conducting its collective affairs, its organising principles, and so forth. National identity is too complex and elusive to be reduced to a set of easily identifiable features or summed up in a few neat propositions. Every definition of it highlights some features, ignores or marginalises others, and is inherently partial and partisan.

National identity is neither unalterable nor a matter of unfettered choice. It is alterable within limits and in a manner that harmonises with its overall character and organising principles. It is not wholly transparent either, and parts of it remain opaque and inaccessible to even a most searching self-examination. No one had expected the allegedly reserved British to express their grief in a relatively uninhibited manner on the occasion of Princess Diana’s death. And the surprise was further compounded when it was discovered that nearly 40 per cent of them had not bothered to watch her funeral on television. National identity, again, is not always a matter of pride. In the aftermath of the Nazi era, many Germans intensely disliked what they discovered about themselves. Deeply afraid to trust themselves, they decided to restructure and regulate their identity by tying themselves closely to a federal Europe. In Britain, too, not all the country’s citizens feel comfortable with its imperial history. While some are very proud of it and others moderately so, yet others feel deeply ashamed of the aggression and the hypocrisy with which their country conquered and justified its rule over weaker societies.

National identity, then, is both given and constantly reconstituted. We might not like parts of it, and might think that even those we do like need to be changed to suit new circumstances. Such changes as we make in it must be consistent with the rest of its constituent elements, as otherwise they cannot graft and take root. All such redefinitions and changes require a deep historical knowledge of the country and a feel for its past, as well as a rigorous and realistic assessment of its present circumstances and future aspirations. While remaining firmly located in the present, we need to make a critical appraisal of our history and use its resources to develop a new sense of national identity that is faithful to the past and yet resonates with present experiences and aspirations. National identity can neither be preserved like an antique piece of furniture nor discarded like an old piece of clothing. It needs to be constantly reassessed, adopted to changing circumstances and brought into harmony with our deeper self-understanding and ideals. To freeze it, to refuse to evaluate and change it, out of inertia, uncritical pride or a mood of nostalgia, is the surest way to subvert it.

The paradox of national identity

Every political community needs to—and, as a rule, tends to—develop a view of its identity, of the kind of community it is and wishes to be. Its view of its identity serves several purposes. It satisfies the intellectual curiosity of its members as to what makes it the kind of community it is and wishes to be. Its view of its identity serves several purposes. It satisfies the intellectual curiosity of its members as to what makes it the kind of community it is, why it is this and not some other community, and how it differs from others. The shared view of national identity unites its members around a common self-understanding and gives focus to their sense of common belonging. It also inspires them to live up to a certain self-image and cultivate the relevant virtues, helps them make wise choices in matters affecting their collective life, facilitates the community’s self-reproduction and
intergenerational continuity, and so forth.

Every conception of national identity, however, also has its dark underside and can easily become a source of conflict and division. Every long-established political community includes several different strands of thought and visions of the good life. Since any definition of its identity is necessarily selective, it stresses some of these and excludes others, so that individuals and groups sharing the latter are delegitimised and reduced to a second-class status. The history, traditions and values of the community can also be read and interpreted in several different ways, and again every definition of national identity shows partiality towards some of these and denigrates others. The dominant definition of national identity can also become a vehicle for moulding the entire society in its image, for there is nothing more important to a society than to maintain its identity, and that leads to an intolerant and authoritarian politics. Again, every definition of national identity has a tendency to distinguish the community concerned fairly sharply from others, and in so doing to offer a highly distorted and unflattering view of the latter and to discourage intercultural borrowing. A view of national identity also tends to prevent or corrupt political debate by introducing a pseudo-ontological mode of reasoning. Some public policies, rather than being discussed in terms of their likely consequences, are dismissed on the ground that they are too incongruent with the national character or identity to be taken seriously. Advocates of the policies concerned are then either reduced to silence or forced to engage in an inherently inconclusive discussion about the community’s true identity. As I will show below, these and related dangers are not at all imaginary and have in fact shadowed much discussion of British national identity.

We are then confronted with what I shall call the paradox of national identity. Every political community needs some shared view of its collective identity; but every such view has an exclusivist, authoritarian, repressive and ideological thrust and a tendency to demean those outsiders who constitute its acknowledged or unacknowledged point of reference. A view of national identity is a force for both unity and division, a condition of the community’s survival and reproduction which can paradoxically also become a cause of its fragmentation and even disintegration.

I suggest that the only way to resolve the paradox is to ensure that a political community’s conception of its identity satisfies the following criteria. First, it should be inclusive and respect the prevailing ethnic, religious, cultural and other diversities and visions of the good life. Obviously no definition of national identity can be purely formal and culturally neutral, but its content should be as widely acceptable as possible.

Second, we must fully acknowledge that since no statement of national identity can ever capture the immense richness and complexity of the community’s history and way of life, it is inevitably partial and even partisan. We must accordingly regard the current conception of national identity as inherently tentative, and welcome (and give to others) opportunities to criticise, contest and revise it.

Third, since national identity is a historical product and can only be revised within limits, any statement of it should be fully sensitive to and, whenever possible, continuous with the community’s history. Since national identity is also intended to equip the community to face challenges to come, it has a futuristic dimension and must not remain trapped
in the past. In other words, it should provide a bridge between the past and the future in order that members of the community can confidently and judiciously both carry and break with its past.

Fourth, the definition of national identity is intended not only to unite but also to inspire members of the community to live up to an idealised vision of how they should live, to evoke and mobilise their sense of collective loyalty, and to make it a matter of pride and joy to belong to the community. Not all the qualities of character the community displays are worthy, and hence a statement of its identity involves critically reflecting on these qualities and determining which of these are noble and worth cherishing.

Fifth, the definition of national identity should be self-contained or autonomous, constructed in terms of what the community is and not how it differs from some other. As noted above, much of the popular and philosophical discussion of identity mistakenly conflates it with difference. A community differs from others because it has a certain identity, not the other way round. And the fact that it differs from them in certain respects does not mean that it may not share other features in common with them. The definition of its identity should not therefore be contrastive and exclusive and make the mistake of seeing others as wholly different, let alone inferior. In order to say that fair play or individualism is part of British national identity, one does not need to say, as Margaret Thatcher did, that these qualities are missing among the French or the Germans, her frequent points of reference.

Sixth, the rationale behind wanting a clear sense of national identity is domestic—to unite and inspire members of the community, to articulate and focus their collective self-understanding. A shared national identity is their vital collective asset and structures and nurtures their relations. It is not meant to impress foreigners, help domestic corporate interests promote their products abroad, or attract tourists. These are at best incidental advantages and do not form the raison d’être of, let alone heteronomously determine, the content of national identity.

Seventh, the statement of national identity cannot be given from above by the government or political leaders or the intellectual elite. It must grow out of a vigorous democratic debate so that it represents the widest possible range of views, articulates the deepest aspirations of citizens, and can be enthusiastically endorsed and owned by them all. However seductively it might be presented, an officially fabricated view of national identity has no emotional roots, lacks democratic legitimacy, is unlikely to convince all, and needs enormous moral and cultural engineering to overcome resistance.

Finally, national identity is the identity of a political community and has a political basis. It is located not in what its members personally like or dislike, but what constitutes and defines them as a political collectivity. The fact that the British like animals, tend to prefer tea to coffee, spend Sunday at home, are not given to expressing their emotions, frown on self-promotion, etc. are their contingent cultural characteristics. Not all of them share these, and even if they do the qualities concerned are politically irrelevant. Their national identity is embedded in the beliefs, practices and institutional structures that constitute and regulate the conduct of their political life. In other words, national identity should be defined in politico-institutional rather than ethno-cultural terms.

Two visions of national identity

The debate on British national identity has been going on since at least the early 1960s, and has given rise to a wide variety of views, of which two have enjoyed considerable popularity. For convenience
I shall call them the new right and the New Labour views of British national identity.

The new right view was first articulated by Enoch Powell. For him the British national identity had four essential and interrelated components. First, it involved parliamentary sovereignty. The House of Commons was ‘the personification of the people of Britain; its independence is synonymous with their independence’. Second, Britain was a fundamentally individualist society and had always cherished the rights and liberties of the individual. This was more true of it than of any other society, and the roots of its individualism went as far back as the beginning of its history and were deeply embedded in the character of the British people. Third, the British national identity was grounded in and constantly nurtured by the ethnic and pre-political unity of the British people. The British were a cohesive people, intensely aware of their ethnic identity, and bound by deep ties of kinship and loyalty to those of their kind at home and abroad. They had a strong sense of ‘the homogenous we’ and instinctively knew who was ‘one of them’ and who was an ‘outsider’. Fourth, thanks to the country’s geography and history, the British national identity was distinctively singular and unattached. Britain was an island, not a part of the continent of Europe; a self-contained and detached entity with its centre of gravity located within itself. Its history reflected its geography and was uniquely global. For long periods of history that were crucial to its development, Britain ‘had stood with her face to the oceans, her back to Europe’. And even when it crossed the oceans to rule the world, like the imperial Rome it never left home and struck roots elsewhere. Since it had always remained itself and belonged to no larger entity, it was able both to be true to itself and to remain open to the world.

Powell used his conception of British national identity to arrive at important conclusions concerning the political issues of the day. He condemned the devolution of power to Scotland and Wales on the ground that it detracted from the sovereignty of Parliament, gave power to ‘anti-parliaments’, and destroyed both the unity and the identity of the country. He condemned large parts of the welfare state because they were incompatible with British individualism and the moral virtues associated with it. He was convinced that British people would never accept and assimilate black and Asian immigrants, as their sense of who they were ‘instinctively revolted’ against the alien cultural presence. Powell therefore suggested that either the ethnic minorities should be repatriated or their rights should be retrospectively reduced. He would not allow their wives and young dependants to join them and regretted his earlier advice to the contrary.

Since British national identity was singular, Powell concluded that it would be suicidal for Britain to join Europe. It was not a European nation, and its geographical proximity to Europe was a contingent matter of little political and cultural significance. Its history had always been enacted within its own borders and on the high seas, never in Europe, and its cultural, political, economic and other institutions as well as its pattern of historical evolution were also distinct. Powell conceded that other European states did not feel threatened by the European community, but insisted that that was so because their identities were different from the British. Since their democratic institutions were of more recent origin and did not have deep historical roots, they did not feel deeply attached to them. The continental states were also quite similar to one another, both because they had sprung from the Napoleonic wars and subsequent historical events and because they had a common social basis in peasant agriculture. They also had similar legal and administrative
institutions and shared a common outlook on politics and society. The federal idea therefore came naturally to them and did not damage their national identity. Since Britain was quite different from them in these and other matters, its destiny lay elsewhere. Unlike many of his successors, Powell did not think that Britain shared much in common with the United States either, and placed little value on a close Anglo-American alliance.

Margaret Thatcher shared Powell’s view of British national identity—with one important difference. She too stressed parliamentary sovereignty, individualism and the ethnic unity of the British people. Although not entirely happy with blacks and Asians and the concomitant cultural pluralism, she took the view that they can and should be assimilated into the British ‘stock’ and way of life. Although as convinced as Powell that the British national character was ‘quite different from the characters of people on the continent’ and that the country ‘has little resemblance to the rest of Europe’, she valued British membership of the European Community, partly to civilise the latter and partly to prevent it from becoming a federal state and posing a threat to vital British interests. Unlike Powell, she insisted that British ‘character’ and ‘culture’ were very similar to those of the United States and that Britain was bound to it by the closest ties of history, language and ‘race’. As she put it recently in an extraordinary remark, all British problems in her lifetime had originated in Europe and their solutions had come from English-speaking nations. Like Powell, she was a British nationalist, but while his nationalism had an ethnic core, hers had a racial dimension; and hence the deep differences in their attitudes to the United States.

Thatcher’s view of British national identity became the operative philosophy of her administration, giving her a sense of direction and self-confidence as well as a body of non-negotiable convictions. She obviously could not deduce specific policies from it, for that depended on contingent circumstances, but it did help her decide what issues or aspects of a situation were significant, why and to what degree. For Thatcher Britain had a distinct genius, identity, soul or essence, and nothing that went against it could ever succeed. She enjoyed a privileged access to and was the high priestess of national Being. For decades successive political leaders, pathetically ignorant of the national character and identity and victims of false self-consciousness, had misled the nation and passively presided over its decline. She was determined to be different. All this gave her politics a quasi-religious character and generated an almost messianic mode of public discourse.

The new right view of British national identity runs through the speeches and writings of John Major. He moderated its tone but not its content, and added the Orwell-derived references to warm beer, long shadows across the country grass, green suburbs, old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist, etc. while studiously avoiding any reference to the industrial towns of the north, queues outside the Labour Exchanges, etc. which were for Orwell just as integral to British identity. The new right view was also reaffirmed by Charles Moore in his 1995 lecture at the Centre for Policy Studies. He added little new, except to demand full integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom and to blame, like Powell, the perfidious administrative elite who had ‘persuaded’ Thatcher to sign the Single European Act. Michael Portillo, who evidently considers the Church of England central to British national identity, John Redwood, David Willetts, Simon Heffer and others have all expressed similar views of British identity.

In a major speech bearing the title ‘Identity and the British Way’, William
Hague asks ‘what it means to be British’ and gives an answer that unmistakably belongs to the new right tradition. He stresses parliamentary sovereignty, ‘the core of our national identity’, and the spirit of enterprise and individualism powerfully encapsulated in ‘Thatcherism’ which ‘preceded Margaret Thatcher by eight hundred years’. Like Thatcher, he sees Britain as a part of Europe but not a European country because of the differences in their experiences during the last war and their manner of articulating their identity. Unlike other European countries Britain has not suffered from ‘invasion and tyranny’, and has wisely invested its national character in and been well served by its political institutions. This was why, according to Hague, visitors to Paris headed for the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre rather than the Assemblée Nationale, whereas those to London preferred Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace.

Departing from Powell and Thatcher, Hague adds two new elements to his definition of British national identity. Britain is an ‘open and mobile society’ which welcomes talents from all backgrounds, as seen in the rise of Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher, and Hague himself from modest origins to high positions. The other ‘defining characteristic’ of British identity is that it is a ‘country of neighbourhoods’ not of regions, of local not regional loyalties, as seen in the traditional British involvement in charities, church groups, voluntary clubs and local institutions. Unlike Powell, Thatcher, Moore and several others, Hague values Britain’s multi-ethnic character but does not think it an integral part of its national identity.

Like Powell and Thatcher, Hague uses his view of British national identity to rule out several policies and to attack the Prime Minister. Devolution of power, especially to Scotland, militates against parliamentary sovereignty, and hence is unacceptable. The same is true of a closer European Union. Proportional representation takes power away from the people, and hence is ‘threatening to British identity’. Regionalism is inherently inconsistent with local loyalties and has no place in a ‘country of neighbourhoods’. On each of these issues, there is very little argument, only assertion: what Hague dislikes is against national identity and the character of the British people. And Tony Blair, accused of nothing less than undermining all the four constituents of British national identity, is turned into the principal enemy of the British people.

The new right view eloquently illustrates the dangers of discussing politics in the elusive language of national identity. Its political reasoning is abstract and \textit{a priori}, relying on an ideologically convenient statement of national identity to legitimise politically acceptable policies and avoid the arduous process of making out a reasoned case for them. The New Right definition of British identity meets none of the eight criteria mentioned earlier and is deeply flawed. Parliamentary sovereignty is not unique to Britain, cannot be equated with democracy because of the unelected House of Lords, means little when the ruling party has a large majority, and is being increasingly eroded by the process of globalisation. What is no less important, we need to ask if it is \textit{desirable} in the current economic and political context, and whether pooling it with that of other European countries may not represent the best way to regulate global forces, promote Britain’s vital interests, and preserve its relative independence and identity. Again, individualism is an important part of British identity; but so is the spirit of mutual concern and social solidarity. The new right spokesmen talk of Britain as a cohesive nation without realising that the nation is a community of sentiments and fate and cannot be based on individualistic foundations. As Michael Oakeshott, the most eloquent
twentieth-century spokesman of English conservatism, put it, British history, like that of all other European countries, has long been marked by both individualist and communitarian impulses, each regulating the other, neither able to defeat its rival, their constant interplay and uneasy balance providing the key to its institutions and policies.

As for Europe, Britain is a European country whose history has long been closely tied up with that of the rest of Europe and whose language, culture, etc. have profoundly influenced and been in turn influenced by it. If Britain did once turn its back on Europe, we need to ask if that stance does not now need reassessment. As for Hague’s social mobility, it is far less extensive than he pretends and goes back no further than the past three decades. If Britain can discard its centuries-old class structure and redefine its identity, there is no reason why it cannot do the same with its other dimensions as well. In short, the new right definition is narrow, exclusive, dogmatic, intolerant, backward-looking and uninspiring. It also lacks democratic legitimacy, encourages the kind of collectivist social engineering we saw under Thatcher, and takes an unjustly demeaning view of major European countries.

During the past few years we have witnessed the emergence of a new view of British national identity advanced by the spokesmen of New Labour. In an influential and well-argued monograph Mark Leonard, an eloquent New Labour representative, stresses Britain’s global connections and European roots, and rightly sees these as complementary. Like the new right he highlights Britain’s individualism, but balances it with an equal emphasis on its sense of justice, fair play and ethic of sharing. Unlike Powell and Thatcher and to a much greater degree than Hague, he accepts Britain’s multi-ethnic and multicultural character as an essential component of its identity and rejoices in it. Like all three he stresses Britain’s commercial dynamism and technological spirit—but also its cultural vitality and creativity.

In several speeches as Prime Minister, Tony Blair has expressed similar views and also emphasised several additional aspects of British identity. As against the new right view, he argues that Britain’s plural political structure is based on the equal partnership of England, Scotland, Wales and perhaps Northern Ireland, and underplays the role of parliamentary sovereignty. As he rightly implies, it is not parliamentary sovereignty but parliamentary democracy that is central to British identity, and the latter is fully consistent with and indeed requires devolution of powers. Blair also stresses Britain’s long tradition of tolerance, cultural plurality, hospitality to different ways of life, social compassion and youthful spirit. His view of British history is largely free of the Thatcherite gloating over how the country ‘civilised’ the inferior races in Asia and Africa and ‘saved’ the rest of Europe from its internal barbarians. As against Hague, Blair also appreciates that Britain has long been and still remains a class-ridden society and needs to be far more open and inclusive.

Although the New Labour view of British national identity as outlined by Mark Leonard and others is more inclusive and tolerant, more in tune with the history and aspirations of the British people, and more sensitive to the contemporary economic and political context than its Conservative rival, it leaves much to be desired. It is eclectic, largely rhetorical and lacks philosophical depth. It tends to reduce national identity to a corporate brand, as if Britain were a political corporation needing a new image to sell itself abroad. It is essentially London-based, celebrating the city’s ‘coolness’, competitiveness, design and financial services, etc., taking only passing note of the rest of the country—and then only if it measures up to London’s standards. The
New Labour view also contains seeds of exclusion and intolerance, tending as it does to imply that those citizens who do not display enterprise, creativity and other desired qualities are not fully British, even perhaps a drag on the country’s progress and a moral embarrassment. It takes little account of the place of England within a radically reconstituted Britain and the need to provide a new overarching redefinition of British identity with which the English can feel comfortable and which can arrest the growth of narrow English nationalism.

Leonard and others draw an untenable contrast between tradition and modernity, between old and new Britain, and their view of British identity has a deeply anti-traditional thrust. While the new right spokesmen are too obsessed with the British past to face its future with fresh eyes, the New Labour view seems to dispense with the past altogether and lacks historical depth and resonance. It is also largely celebratory, stressing aspects such as Britain’s inventive genius, and taking only a cursory look at its weaknesses. Since it lacks a critical and reflective dimension, its definition of British identity remains somewhat superficial. Leonard’s proposal that Britain should mobilise all its institutions to project his view of its identity at home and abroad is troubling. It homogenises British identity, ignores the great British virtues of modesty, scepticism, self-mocking irony and self-effacement, and is likely to prove morally suffocating.

Although Tony Blair is more sensitive to these dangers, he too tends to see British national identity in terms of how Britain should be projected abroad. Calling Britain young when a quarter of its population is over sixty does not offer a sufficiently inclusive vision of it. Nor is it advisable to aim to become a beacon to the world or its moral leader. If others find something worth learning from the way we solve our problems, we should be pleased. But to imagine that we have some special talents in this area and that the rest of the world eagerly looks to us for moral guidance is to invite disappointment and the charge of hubris. To say that every nation has a ‘purpose’ is to make the Thatcherite mistake of taking too simplified a view of its history and identity and suppressing its inescapable diversities and disagreements.

Although the new view of British national identity that we need to develop will draw on the insights of New Labour, it must also go beyond it. It must be grounded in a critical interpretation of British history, identifying parts of it that we have reasons to be proud or ashamed of, and forming a coherent and balanced collective self-understanding. We also need to engage in a vigorous democratic debate on the kind of Britain we wish to and can realistically hope to create in its current historical circumstances. Although we can reasonably be expected to agree on some aspects of that vision, we would disagree on others. Such disagreement is not only inescapable but also desirable, for it reflects the vitality of British political culture and prevents the hegemonic domination of any one view. The search for national identity is an unending process, both because a rich and complex society cannot be reduced to a crisp definition and because new circumstances constantly call for new definitions.

The process of British self-definition, then, is a conversation between different and conflicting views, and at best yields an inherently temporary and tentative consensus that for a while forms the basis of its political life. The more it satisfies the criteria listed earlier, that is, the more inclusive, tolerant, culturally plural, open-minded, historically grounded, inspirational and democratically based it is, the greater is its power to mobilise all Britons around a set of common purposes. New Labour cannot hope to win the enthusiastic loyalty not just of ‘middle England’ but of the entire and increasingly pluralised country unless it
undertakes the intellectually demanding task of articulating such a broad and generous view of the British national identity. It has the required cultural and moral resources, but lacks the patience and a reflective and critical impulse. As for the new right, little can be expected of it, at least at present. Hague and his associates are too heavily trapped within the Thatcherite past and too nervous to rethink the fast-changing British and European political reality to do anything more than retail the old nationalist and libertarian banalities.