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History and Identity

‘Home’ is the most commonly cherished political concept in the world and yet it scarcely rates a mention in the solemn ranks of books about the theory of it all. Turn to the newsagents, and there are the classic texts: *Homes and Gardens*, *House and Garden*, *Ideal Home*, *Home Life*, and dozens of siblings, each crammed with the promise of happiness and the fulfilments of belonging.

Those glowing images speak of such wanting, and the incomparable satisfaction of finding what you want. “Home is so sad,” Philip Larkin wrote. But he saw what it was, what it could be, what still we all reach for, “A glorious shot at how things ought to be”. And how they ought to be, the magazines tell us, is that serene and sunlit balance of farmhouse kitchen and cruise ship engine- room; of bathrooms with antique Tuscan tiles and shining steel and heavy glass; of deep alcoves filled with tooled bindings above a small, exquisite flat-screen computer.

These pictures never wither. They join a mythic past to a free and fearless future. This is the great narrative we all seek to contrive out of our lives, the vivid coincidence of what each person believes about his or her life, with what their society, insofar as it *is* a society, can provide by way of loving corroboration and credible endorsement.

Love and the beloved republic, E M Forster said, are the pieces out of which we make a livable life, a sufficient dignity, a home you can belong to. But as Helena Kennedy writes with poetic force in the *Power Commission Report*, “when it comes to politics most people feel they are eating stones”.

Poetic force is unusual in official diction these days. Politicians no longer speak as if people have souls. The dreadful doctrines of managerialism and its deathly language have them all in thrall. The joyful recognition of absolutely everybody at Ricky Gervase’s gibberish in *The Office* was token of people’s alienation from the deathly language now ordering everyday life.

I bumped into these delicious little snippets in a university circular just the other day. Its ineffable authors sought to arrange a “focused away day” at which “module managers” (the teachers of the courses) would “align programme portfolios with strategic objectives” while conducting “role analysis for confirmation of the pay spine” (ha!) and “evaluating market positioning, liability and risk assessment”.

Even after editing for redundancy, danglers, and sheer clunk, this is an idiom in which it is impossible to distinguish between truth and lies. When this is not the mode of public speech, then the fatuous unreality of advertising diction and straplines takes over, as it does in every White Paper, and we are treated to all that revolting stuff about rewarding excellence, driving up standards, freedom of choice, leadership style, transparent accountability, topped and bottomlined by the crazed supposition that, like the Stakhanovites in 1920s Russia, everyone can be set performance targets and measured for meeting them.

Eating stones; eating polystyrene too. If this is the language of the polity, no wonder our people – the British people – do not seem to know who or what they are.

Or rather, they do not know it *as* a people. Yet if I am asked, “to whom do you belong?”, I would not want to answer, any more, I believe, than most people would, “I belong only to myself”. I would say I belonged to those I love best: wife, children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers-in-law, nephews, nieces, cherished friends; after them, to dead parents, dead friends come to that; and beyond them, or not beyond at all, but as immediate and tangible as the smell of fresh bread or the sound of Mozart, to *places*, loved places, some inside and some outside the window, some two, three hundred miles away, but, as we say, “part of me” such that they are mine and I am theirs although of course I have no legal ownership in them.

So, just now, staring out at the wintry afternoon, a seascape presents itself, a grey blunt little town, a harbour with its hardly employed fishing boats, and the wide and wonderful curve of the brown-gold Northumbrian beach closed at its northern end, where the huge clouds pile and disperse, by the massive permanence of Bamburgh Castle.

I’ve never lived there. I’ve always loved it. On holidays I and my daughters were happy there. Holidays do that. They configure ideal homes and good societies, where local people keep antique courtesies and where we repair and polish our sense of our best selves.

Holidays provide little fables for memories to shape into biography. Like childhood, they restore to us the lost Eden of happy membership and solitary belonging. The places which are so enshrined become way-stations in the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, about our safe belonging, of a history which would give us work and bring us home.

A politics which cannot attempt this superhuman, supernatural, perfectly doable task is a dish of stones. The deadness of our daily self-organisation is that it cuts us off from the ideal history living in our secret fables. The terrible dreariness of domestic television tales, along with the foam-flecked and insincere raging of the yellow press, is simply the obverse of our complicit self-management. Unmoved, on one screen you watch people screaming at each other; meanwhile, unmoved,, you watch your daily work unscroll across another.

All the time, history beats in our blood and quickens the pace of the story of our lives, so hard to tell, so endlessly revised.

II

It is the point of the life of each and every one of us to discover its story and turn it into something to be proud of. That is why there has been so much talk about identity for a generation. For to identify one's identity is to make a first answer to the frightening question, "who am I?" If there comes no answer to that, then the self shrinks to a vanishing point. One's identity sets a horizon to one's moral world, gives it scale and landmarks.

At the same time, however, the quest for and definition of identity places sudden responsibility on the individual. For the peculiarly modern intonation of the word indicates that identity is not simply given, it is in part chosen and in part invented. You can't choose *any* identity, of course. Some things about identity are given, but others – beliefs, inheritance, allegiance, language – may be changed, and different characteristics emphasised.

The matter is personal, and the many crises of identity discernible in the modern world arise precisely because individualism and the strong, declarative expression of individuality which is its meaning has dissolved so many of the old fixities of membership, whether of class, generation, race, church or gender. Above all, individualism and its free expression has

dissolved the certainties of nation and nationalism, and made their patriotic display so very much less frequent and convincing.

As we all know, this doesn't mean that nationalist self-assertion has disappeared. But it does mean that such assertiveness often has something forced or sentimental to it, as is plain to see in the United States. It represents an effort to beat back the uncertainties of all that is feared under the heading 'globalisation'. Here at home, patriotic feeling is almost inaudible. Even the strains of Welshness or Scottishness are much fainter now than thirty years ago, and Englishness is become pale and spectre-thin, and maybe moribund.

However, having confected some sort of identity out of what is given and what one can feasibly make oneself into, there is still the necessity for a society in which such an identity can live. This truth is brought out by those people whose preferred identity is simply not recognised by other people. This is, at some extremes, what it is to be deranged; other people cannot recognise such a person *as* a person.

Identity is dual therefore; there is the distinctive me, and then me as a member of a recognisable social group. The whole society is then constituted by a federation of such groups, and if one such group becomes shut out from membership, has recognition of its identity somehow withheld, that group counts itself out of the society's rules and no longer bound by its will. Hence the entirely proper agitation about 'exclusion'. Too many people feel themselves unrecognised by their parent society. They fashion some sort of personal identity, partly given, partly chosen. But they cannot make or are not permitted the third, crucial creation in the formation of identity. They cannot belong because they are not recognised.

So it is that identity approaches the very heart of social cohesion. A society and its people are only free not when they may simply do as they like without constraint, but when they freely govern themselves. To do this, citizens must look to their citizenship, or tyrants will do it for them. There are plenty of candidates for tyranny among the vegetable fascists of modern management.

To rule oneself in a mutual society demands both identification and commitment to that society, and these in turn require high levels of mutual trust. That trust must be endlessly

renewed by our daily and reciprocal conduct: in domestic life, as decent partners, neighbours, parents of amenable school pupils, officials of little societies, part-time students, conscientious workers; in civic life, as payers of taxes, dutiful voters, vigorous attendants at public meetings, careful sceptics of political or commercial mountebanks.

Yet the thinness of this list suggests the size of our present predicament. The common moral horizon of present identity is hard to see. The personal definitions of available identity have lost much of their common ground. Collective identity assumes no coherent or intelligible shape. The State itself, which ought to be the reassuring framework of our collective identity and the instrument of its moral agency, has disappeared into innumerable privatised offices, and has lost its gravity and authority. It is mostly a precise, efficient but meaningless dispenser of cheques and consultations.

III

History is the only source of identity and its replenishment. The dominance of science as the explanatory model of the world we all turn to first is over; henceforth, what will be needed is common agreement that historical explanation is the only sufficient basis for the intelligent conduct of human affairs, and this requires a collective effort of self-education.

It is a truth we all intuitively acknowledge. Faced with a ghastly quandary in our ordinary lives, we ask, “how on earth did I get into this mess in the first place?” and only when that question is truthfully answered is it possible to work out what to do next.

History perforce provides the identity of every Britisher with a moral horizon of sorts, but the nation’s self-definition – that collective and active identity essential to the life of its democracy – must needs arise from a sufficiently shared knowledge of that history. This in turn will mean reckoning up not only what has been irrevocably lost, but also what has disappeared in its original form of life, yet which still endures, transmuted into later forms, still carrying much of its former moral energies.

One obvious instance of this is the great Anglican compromise, originally and excellently contrived to soften the dictatorial aspects of Catholicism, and to embody a quiet and genteel compromise over religious belief which would superannuate martyrdom, religious warfare

and pogroms. The terms of that slow reconciliation are now theologically impotent in a largely secular, partially multi-faith country. But its language and frame of feeling pervade the habits of unquarrelsome compromise which is surely deep in the foundations of Britishness.

The trouble with so much talk about ‘values’ at the moment is that they are vacuously invoked but dizzily underdescribed, like those ridiculous banners at President Bush’s campaign meetings, reading (one to a banner), ‘Leadership!’ ‘Resolve!’ ‘Moral Clarity!’ If the attributes of compromise and toleration are to be credited as absolutely formative of Britishness (and I think they are), then they have to be understood as they were historically constituted, that is, in terms of the compromise emerging from the century-long invention of Anglicanism, and in its turn, tolerance as slowly coming to dominate the resentments and refusals of the 1707 Act of Union, its mainland participants hanging silently on to local identity while accommodating themselves to the strangeness of being British.

It is also clear that the struggle to establish a peculiarly British form of a half-Christianised socialism is over. The planned economy, the fine and proper righteousness of a nation’s owning and redistributing its own life-essentials – water, fuel, shelter, health, baby milk, burials – all so nobly vindicated in wartime, have broken up under the impact of a later, more powerful economics.

But the doctrine of equality alongside the truculent bloody-mindedness of the British working class out of which socialism grew, remains a defining aspect of Britishness. I take for granted that the twenty-five-year delirium of money-worship so hysterically baptised by Mrs Thatcher is coming to an end with the end of the present Prime Minister, and that juster and more seemly levels of income tax will shortly return to help restore that key British value.

Culture is the ground of our being; politics the figures we draw upon the ground. Every value lives only in the thick texture and sometimes bloodstained drama of actual, ordinary life. British manners are marked, so George Orwell told us sixty-odd years ago, by their gentleness. Well, so they are, and witness to this is the general detestation of road rage bullies. But gentleness shades at times into mere acquiescence, while at its strongest – as in London after the underground bombs – it fills up into capaciousness.

So too with Orwell's other chosen value of Britishness (that he was writing about the *English* is just another token of tolerance). The devotion to privacy he observed is as strong as ever, but that too shades off into other, adjacent values with as large a claim on our symbolism. Privacy grows in quiet; it connotes the pleasures of solitude as well as family solidarity; it depends on self-sufficiency and a strong sense of independence; it may often be a function of snobbery, of detachment from life, of routine selfishness.

But the huge, civic crowds thronging the garden centres every Sunday are paying their homage to those complex values, as well as to yet older ones, British certainly, universal perhaps, such as a reverence for nature, a love of natural beauty, the keen satisfactions of growing your own food, all still lively residues of a once-peasant nation, still pledged to do what it can for those antique bonds.

Institutions embody ideals. There is a constellation of enshrined ideas in those symbols we name as constitutive of Britishness. Some of the symbols are marked with shame, and it can be no part of identity restoration nor of the maintenance of trust not to acknowledge the things ill-done and done to others' harm – Kitchener's concentration camps, the Amritsar massacres, the Mau Mau slaughter – in the name of so vast and unignorable a symbol as the Empire.

But the Empire itself has struck back, not only in the slow, uneven but more or less tolerant accommodation of two entire generations of its migrants, but also in a historical remaking of its ledgers, such that credit has been re-entered to the legacies of so many principled, generous and self-sacrificing District Commissioners, Collectors, teachers, doctors and pastors who worked themselves to death for its best ideals.

The greatest civic institutions of Britain are now, let us say, as follows: the much-invoked, praised-and-reviled NHS, homely assuager of bodily fears; the BBC, pillar of rectitude, of a judicious political criticism, doyen of great art, parent of the well-loved communities of the soap operas which fill with suds the spaces of over-privatised lives; the National Trust, guardian of our homecomings in the sea-and-landscape; the universities, messy, crowded, uneven, over-managed, but nonetheless serving in a far more egalitarian and scholarly way something of the social function of the old stately homes; Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer's, present here as emblems of the consumerism which is undoubtedly part of all

identities, but also of an excellent democracy of cuisine and clothing, a nice balance of quality and equality.

The argument about British identity invites the participation of the people to name those institutions which enshrine their best ideals as well as carrying the massive weight of their history. It is also to ask them to judge what it is causes people to live badly and shamefully. Those best things I have suggested have in common, for sure, the several values of homeliness. Insofar as a beloved home is a small citadel of trust, an inviolate refuge, an ever-present help in trouble, than it is the origin of the values of the polity. A culture lives strongest in its images of home – as the place you had to leave, whence you could glimpse the light in the window of your absence, to which you would finally return to be healed and made young again.

One test of a culture is the power and beauty of its representation of the politics of home, and home is where one learns those two mightiest principles of an upbringing in British identity: to treat others as you would have them treat you, and to seek for oneself an unexploitative happiness. These unexalted principles are to be found in the best-loved British landscape paintings, from Constable to the Nash brothers, in Shakespeare's late comedies, in the great homecomings of our greatest novelists, , in the quiet walks, heavy with history, of poets from Wordsworth to Ted Hughes, in the fond movies of Michael Powell and David Lean and the music of Vaughan Williams and Britten. A culture is home to all its members, and identity the best and truest thing they each must make of it.