

## **National Identity and Britishness**

The concept of national identity and in the case of this country the idea of being British has been subjects of intense public debate for some considerable time. Most recently the intensity of the debate has been further fuelled by Sir Keith Ajegbo's curriculum review 'Diversity and Citizenship'. The root of the debate lies in our desire to define our national identity in the face of the challenge posed by a steady stream of foreigners and the need to find ways of meeting this challenge. Two diametrically opposite ways of dealing with the challenge were highlighted in Radio 4's 'pm'-programme on Thursday the 25<sup>th</sup> and Friday the 26<sup>th</sup> of January. Here the generous and liberal attitude of Sweden to its asylum seekers was contrasted with the hard and uncompromising attitude of Denmark; an attitude I as a Dane find hard to reconcile with the liberal democracy I left 33 years ago.

There are some common threads that run through most of the contributions to the debate: The emphasis on an active and inclusive democracy, appreciation, understanding and respect for other cultures, the right to free speech and respect for the rule of law as being truly British values. But are these values the exclusive property of the British nation? Are they not values that distinguish any civilized society? If it is to have meaning to debate these concepts, surely we need to define what distinguish nations from one another not what unites us.

So, what does it mean to belong to a nation ie to be British, English, Swedish, Danish whatever? Possibly the best way to describe the concept of national identity is 'familiarity' or a feeling of comfort and security. Loyalty may also be imbedded in the concept especially when some effort or expense is required to express it. That is loyalty and support given to sporting teams and individual men and women appearing on the international arena and you have to arrange to be at the location where they are performing, loyalty and support given to commercial companies by having an instinctive preference for their products, and loyalty to the political institutions which governs the country to which ones nation principally belongs.

Through childhood and early youth you should have come to know about and have had experience of features of the British political, social, cultural and economic life. Among these features I would suggest are having to choose between a Conservative party ostensibly seeking to preserve the established political order and a Labour party seeking to protect the less privileged; drinking of tea, 'bitter' and 'mild' ale or beer, 'roast beef and Yorkshire pudding', hedgerows surrounding small meadows, canals connecting centres of industry and double decker buses would all be part of the picture.

You are also British if you resist having your shopping measured in meters, kilogram, and litres. Not out of spite for these continental measures, but because the British foot, pound and pint were standardised and widely recognised and used long before metrication, which therefore seem superfluous and unnecessary. Conversion can be done by anybody with a minimum of numerical sense.

It all has its roots in the particular living conditions afforded by these islands and the interplay of its inhabitants with our neighbours and other nations throughout the world. It is commonly referred to as our heritage or in the words of Keith Ajegbo's report "the experience of living in the UK, contextualised in relation to an understanding of its history and a sense of belonging". Most important, however, is the language that exists mainly and is practiced and spoken mainly in the UK

You are British if you are able to translate the physical, emotional and conceptual reality of your life into English whether you are living here or abroad. There is the everyday language as spoken in England with certain expressions such as ‘tarah doc’ which are not taught in English lessons here or abroad, but which nevertheless are in common use here. There is of course also the use of swearing and swear words which for the most parts defy translation into any other language.

Whether you like or dislike, approve or disprove of these features and customs is irrelevant. The important thing is that you know about them and have had experience of them to such an extent that they have become part of you and in a way that comforts you in your daily life. However, vaguely expressed, the concept of nationhood is not an artificial, abstract concept. One of the key findings of Keith Ajegbo is that issues of identity and diversity are neglected in Citizenship education by which he recognizes that to most peoples throughout the world these are living realities in their every day lives.

In biology the scientists have ideas about preserving genes, which may carry benefits for future generations. In the same way we should all preserve, protect and celebrate our ‘cultural genes’, because only in this way can we be conscious of our national identity and the differences between us and other nationalities. The awareness of differences will then raise important questions of how reasonable it is to continue with your established way of life and in the words of another quote from Ajegbo’s report: “When you understand someone else’s culture, you’re more likely to respect them.”

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