



Wrapped in the Tatters of the Flag

by Patrick Wright

Published in the *Guardian*, 31 December 1994
(Downloaded from www.patrickwright.net)

Is patriotism proving once again to be the last refuge of a floundering government? The thought must have occurred to many who glanced at the front page of *The Times* on the Thursday before Christmas. The main story concerned a MORI poll, which revealed the Government to be the most unpopular ever recorded. The article directly below announced that John Major was planning a 'crusade' to 'rekindle public confidence in Britain's greatness'.

This timely initiative is to be launched at a one-day conference at Chatham House in March. Labour politicians will be asked to join in, as will business people, academics, the BBC and the British Council, too. It is likely that Major will be there, but the revival will be led by the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, who announced, on Radio 4's Today programme last Tuesday, that 'the years of decline' are over and that Britain 'should get back some self-confidence as a country'.

Hurd's travels have led him to believe that Britain is 'a very much stronger country than most people at the moment reading our newspapers would suppose'. Since foreigners tend to be more conscious of 'the strengths of our institutions', he intends to use this encouraging overseas profile to buck up the moaning natives and to 'sell' Britain both at home and abroad. Among the assets to be addressed at the conference are the increasingly global predominance of the English language, our experience and 'know-how' in privatization, our diplomatic peace-keeping skills, and our ability to help governments train their police and make their armies professional and free of political bias.

It is not hard to see why the Government may seek to repatriate British virtues from abroad at this time. But the strategy is no less risky than was the back-to-basics campaign, which backfired so humiliatingly as it emerged that one Tory MP after another had failed to live up to the required standard [Including John Major, whose affair with Edwina Currie would not be disclosed until some ten years later. PW, September 2007].



It is hard to feel confident in the proclaimed superiority of our democracy after a year of sleaze. Domestic perception of our military skills can be clouded by many factors, from cuts in the military budget to the ruthless immorality of the arms trade and Mark Thatcher's still unexplained prosperity. Britain's experience with privatization may still thrill the World Bank and its cohorts in places such as Argentina or eastern Europe, but the experience here is full of embarrassments.

More broadly, however, this is a good time to be considering British identity, and how we are to stand both to ourselves and to the outside world in the years to come. For much of the last year, the symbolic mainstays of the British way of life seem to have been collapsing one after another into disheveled heaps. The monarchy fell hardest, but 1994 was hardly a brilliant year for the NHS, the Church, the police or the judiciary. Indeed, the national quality that has shown most resilience has been a jeering cynicism, fostered by the tabloids, but shared by many who are doing pretty well and wouldn't really like to see things much different, but who still like to mock and moan at the hypocrisy of those in public authority.

John Major's own appeals to British patriotism have done little more than reveal the present weakness of the imagery that moved people so deeply in the wake of the Second World War. Rummaging around not so long ago for something that would reassure Eurosceptics that Britain would 'survive unamendable in all essentials', he and his speechwriters came up with Orwell's 'old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist', and added a few English touches of his own: long shadows on the county grounds, warm beer, and, most curiously, 'invincible green suburbs'. This was widely lampooned as dim stuff.

P D James may soldier on, deriving her view of the world from a remembered pre-war Golden Age when English people could recite poetry by heart and the map was still pink. But all the signs are that mid-century England has finally died on us, and can no longer even pretend to serve as an adequate emblem of British identity. Its major poet, Philip Larkin, has been exposed as a small-minded bigot and kicked off his pedestal by his own literary executors. The phone boxes and buses that were so central to its municipal image have been replaced, privatized or turned into listed buildings. The jovial English football supporter has mutated into a vile lager lout and, even with John Major's support, our cricketers are a terrible embarrassment. As for the Union Jack, anyone who ran that up a pole in their garden would be suspected of the worst possible taste, and probably also of being a member of the British National Party.

In its heyday this imagery was supported by the certainties of empire, but it has long since been thrown into a minor key. Englishness, particularly, now often appears as a



diminished and residual thing, arrived at only after all sorts of modern excrescences - from modern architecture to Europe - have been peeled away from it. There is timorousness about it, and it is also susceptible to xenophobic expression of the sort exemplified by *This England*, the 'heritage' quarterly that has long been using a residual and largely expatriate view of Morris dancers and thatched cottages to set off its tribal idea of the threatened nation against egalitarianism, modernization, and, above all, the 'multiculturalism' of a hated post-war history.

Douglas Hurd is not playing this game. His initiative is closer to the different tradition of the advertising and marketing types in whose honour Raymond Williams once suggested, bitterly, that Britain should be renamed the 'Yookay'. The Yookay never quite caught on, but we no longer laugh at the idea of the UK plc. The advertising agencies make no apologies for conceiving of Britain as a brand and an image bank, rather than as a historical nation with a diverse cultural and political inheritance.

Here too, however, there are problems - as Hurd will notice if he reads a recent report called *Nations for Sale*, written by Anneke Elwes for the international advertising network DDB Needham. In this study of Britain's overseas image, Elwes finds Britain to be 'a dated concept', difficult 'to reconcile with reality'. Our 'brand personality' is entrenched in the past and, in America at least, has become almost entirely 'fictionalized'.

The image - which relies heavily on Merchant Ivory films, BBC dramatizations of 19th-century novels, and Helena Bonham Carter working overtime - may boost tourism, and serve companies like Rover, Laura Ashley and Marks & Spencer, which is able to command an extraordinary price for crumpets in Paris. But it also lays a dead hand on many of our future prospects.

Elwes cites a recent *Time International* survey, in which Britain was rated first out of 31 nations when it comes to decline. She suggests that this heritage-based imagery is stifling alternatives and, contrary to what Hurd believes, reinforcing Britain's image as a cold, male-dominated place - emotionally arid, as stuffy as a gentleman's club, and chronically uninnovative too. The message is spelt out clearly enough: UK plc needs to use its undersold talents in design, fashion, marketing and the media to rebuild its 'brand equity', thereby maximising the 'inventiveness' that comes with our 'rich cultural diversity' and making more of our reputation for individuality.

A large and simple fact underlies all this anxious reaching out for a national identity. The Britain of the post-war settlement has come apart in front of our eyes. This conception, which owed much to the exceptional common purpose of the Second World



War, included a since-disappointed confidence in the welfare state as social improver and facilitator of the economy, and a related set of assumptions about public service and professionalism.

It retained the class structure, albeit in softened form; it also reflected a certain imperial confidence that Britain did indeed have things to show the world, a confidence that was applied to the NHS and later taken in new directions by campaigning movements from CND to Amnesty International.

This idea of the nation is looking defunct nowadays, but it would be quite wrong to suggest that we have only suffered its disintegration as passive or regretful victims. Indeed, we have enjoyed it enormously. Since the Sixties, at least, we have lived and breathed disintegration, and found all sorts of creative opportunities there. The dull centre of welfare-state Britain was a great resource for popular culture, which has defined itself against it with endless flair. We have satirized it, derived unique styles of humour and irony from it, and developed cosmopolitan cuisines against it.

We have sharpened our own sense of scandal in opposition to it, and developed our own forms of hypocrisy in its image. Xenophobia and race hatred have certainly been part of the story, but we have also found advantages in the fact that welfare-state Britain stood at the heart of an imploding empire. The timewarped imagery of UK plc may still present us as ancient thoroughbreds, but our urban culture has long since gone over to what the image consultants now call 'cultural hybridity'.

Over the decades we have found a million different ways of standing at a distance from our inherited Britishness, of snorting at the very thought of its patriotism, and taking flight into style, irony, hallucinations, all-embracing causes and one or other form of minority or identity politics. We have seen the creation of countless subcultures, and no end of cultural practices based on 'transgressing the norms', as the Saatchis might prefer it said.

But somewhere along the line, the abandoned centre really did start to fall apart. By the Eighties what had previously been done with irony, satire and popular song was being done for real with privatization and free-market dogma. The whole value structure of the post-war settlement was being reduced to the market reality of UK plc.

The very idea of cultural value came to be equated with snobbery. Eminent liberals came up for attack as pompous fools. The professions were torn down too - as if the only thing that motivated them was self-interest. The earnestness of the reformer or campaigner became susceptible to lampoon as a ludicrous joke.



Few people are gauche enough to say they would like to turn the clock back, or to re-establish that clotted bureaucratic centre. Yet if there is a something resembling a new patriotism in the air, it has little to do with marketing imagery and overseas conceptions of the British 'brand'. Instead, it is manifest in an often somewhat surprised respect for that derided time when people still imagined a common culture and when the idea of social improvement had not been trashed as a sanctimonious delusion cooked up by self-serving professionals.

This feeling was stirred, quite unmistakably, at Dennis Potter's death. Many people, including some who had loathed his recent work, found themselves deeply moved by his final testimony to the working-class patriotism that had been distorted and twisted by imperialism and then hijacked by the right.

The trouble with words, as Potter once said of patriotism, is that you never know whose mouths they've been in. Potter talked of 'steadfast' qualities of the nonconformist mining culture of the Forest of Dean where, even as he grew up, the book of Genesis was giving way to Wagon Train and Cliff Richard. He saw these values built into the lumbering and imperfect welfare state, but then 'wantonly' destroyed by the party that now wants to count 'privatization' as an 'asset' Britain can sell to the world.

A similar depth of feeling was stirred by the death of John Smith, whose funeral was like a moment of national awakening. These were sincere tributes and well-deserved too, but we may still wonder why we have allowed our appreciation of common decencies to become quite so mixed up with funerals.

There will be more deaths next year, but the main challenge is to re-establish that sense of public value, not as a funereal tribute but as something vital at the centre of the national culture. This is not just a matter of 'rebuilding the brand' of UK plc, or of reviving the sentimental imagery of welfare-state Britain. Something altogether more vigorous and forward-looking is necessary. If there is to be a renewed patriotism, it needs to be committed more to activity than imagery. Instead of settling for John Major's mawkish idea of Britain as 'unamendable in all essentials', it will have to start from the realization that the country needs to be thoroughly amended.

It should be sharp enough to cut through the specious management rhetoric that uses ludicrous euphemisms to obfuscate decisions that should properly be understood in terms of responsibility, cause and effect. Its objects, which will never be filmed by Merchant Ivory, must be to put systems of accountability in place of quangocracy and the Tory *nomenklatura*; and to insist that the state can be both virtuous and strong



without suffocating libertarian impulses or imposing a crushing uniformity. As for our conception of democracy, we can't go on much longer confusing this with a polished-up ceremony attended by Beefeaters in Westminster.




Douglas Hurd's conference will be worth watching. Those who still wish to test the sincerity of the Foreign Secretary might keep an eye on the third of the four proposed 'breakout sessions', which will address Britain's role in 'encouraging political and economic reform'. The privatizing advisers will be there, along with their contacts in the Overseas Development Administration. But will Hurd ensure that the invited aid agencies include the World Development Movement, the fine British organisation - patriotic but also internationalist - that recently took him to the High Court and successfully challenged the legality of his use of aid funds to win contracts around the Pergau Dam?

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