

## **What it is to be British**

Who are the British – who do we think we are? That’s as much a question for an Australian as it is for the citizens of the UK. Michael Heavers piece on this blog caught my attention; he is wondering out loud whether he is more English than British. His musings have drawn quite a commentary including on what it means to be British. The debate often confuses citizenship with nationality when it should also be about heritage and culture. I don’t have to live in Israel to be Jewish; arguably I don’t have to be a citizen of the UK to identify with British attributes and qualities. A few people in recent times have had a crack at this. In 2002 former Tory Chairman Norman Tebbit equated being British with barracking for the English Cricket Team; it was a test of ‘integration’ (big ask even for an Englishman back then). John Major commented in the context of the EU; he said that in 50 years' time, the UK would still be the country of "long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and - as George Orwell said 'old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist' ". That same year Professor Sir Bernard Crick was named by the UK Government to set up a ‘Britishness’ test for intending immigrants. Controversy swirled around the appointment which soon became a discussion about race. In 2005 the UK Commission for Racial Equality published a Report on Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness? It’s worth reading as the project covered eight dimensions that contribute to the sense of being British and the weight people attached to those attributes. The divide was predictably between nationality and citizenship. Gordon Brown’s speech to the Fabian Society in 2006 was about national identity as he sought to establish his credentials as a PM in waiting for all Britons.

For my part the terminology British and Britishness has been tweaked and defined over time depending on who was invoking the nomenclature. With the establishment of the Union in 1707 it was a convenient ‘layered’ identity that rose to prominence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century – British Empire and all that. Nowadays to be British is a description of the people of the UK intertwined with a sense of culture (‘everything we have think and do’: Bernstein, The Social Order). In Colonial times and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century many Australians described themselves as British; so too in NZ and I suspect Canada. I met many an Indian, Pakistani and African at university replete with accent who believed that they embodied the best of

British qualities – more a turn of phrase than citizenship or nationality. The Commonwealth is an embodiment of that family of countries who share a certain history and heritage; countries who have largely embraced those British institutions of the Westminster system, separation of powers, freedom of speech, rule of law. There are the human traits (don't laugh); a willingness to queue, compassion for others and consideration for your neighbours. The personal qualities include ambition, drive, determination, persistence, hard work, creativity, single mindedness and a degree of politeness and courteous behaviour (apart from the occasional boisterous Aussie and Kiwi). Australians might nowadays sit down to a varied menu shaped by successive waves of Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Chinese, Vietnamese migration but the staple British fare persists (except for the kippers). British humour still tickles our fancy and sport is part of the cultural glue that connects us – cricket, tennis, bowls, soccer (sorry, football), rugby and the Commonwealth Games. Most importantly we all speak the same language – English.

To be British for many might be about citizenship but for others it's an embodiment of how we live and the institutions to which we subscribe.

I have a fair dose of the Irish in me from the maternal side – over 4 generations to Australia came from Clare, Cork, Limerick and Dublin Roscommon. They were all Catholic, oppressed, poor and dispossessed; so anti British were my mother's great grandparents they registered the birth of their children in St. Patricks Cathedral Ballarat in defiance the colonial civil authorities. My paternal side from Devon converted to Catholicism in Australia so one might expect that all the ingredients were in play to foster anti British sentiment. Far from it I am a proud Australian and I look upon the mix of Irish, English and Scottish ancestry as typical for my demographic and to be valued.

I am not British, I am Australian however I identify very strongly with the United Kingdom and those British institutions we have embraced as our own.

Michael Heavers don't dismiss the value of 'tradition, unity and heritage' as described in your article. We need fewer countries in the world, not more and a revitalised Commonwealth that articulates and promotes those British institutions that stand out as beacons of freedom and a fair go.

There is a lesson in this for the Cameron Government – if the sense of identity with being British in the UK is drifting as it appears to be then do something about it. People need a reason to believe and identify – understanding their own history and contribution to the world would be a good start. Second, start paying closer attention to your extended family worldwide, you might just need them in re-building the UK.