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British identity

Its sources and possible implications for civic attitudes and behaviour

In the last decades of the twentieth century, there was a decline in the proportion of people in Great Britain who thought of themselves as primarily or exclusively British and a growing proportion of people who thought of themselves as Scottish, Welsh or English (or none of these) rather than British.

A sense of British identity nevertheless remains widespread and in all three territories the majority of British residents continue to have dual identities, as both British and Scottish, British and Welsh or British and English. A small but growing number (around 10%) of people reject all four national identities.

Britons tend to feel proud of being British, and levels of national pride are higher than in most other countries in the EU15. In contrast, levels of attachment or sense of belonging to Britain (which may be the more relevant aspect in the context of civil society) is below the European average.

There is evidence of decline over the last two decades in strength of national pride (although largely from 'very strong' to 'fairly strong' sense of pride) and there may well have been a modest decline in attachment too.

The main driver of a feeling of attachment or belonging to Britain is age, with younger people being less strongly attached to Britain. It is likely that much of the decline in pride and attachment is generational in character, with younger generations who feel a lower sense of attachment gradually replacing older generations.

Controlling for age, we find no evidence that Muslims or people of Pakistani heritage were in general less attached to Britain than were other religions or ethnic groups. Ethnic minorities show clear evidence of 'dual' rather than 'exclusive' identities. However, people born overseas in a non-Commonwealth country and people who have arrived in Britain only recently tend to have a weaker sense of belonging to Britain.

Socio-economic marginality (lower social class or low income, or a limiting long-term illness) is associated with slightly weaker feelings of belonging.

Among young people born in Britain, the lack of attachment of Black Caribbeans is especially marked, reaching one-third or more. This applies to the second generation as well as to the first, migrant generation.

A feeling of belonging or attachment to Britain appears to be associated with social trust, a sense of civic duty (at least as indicated by turnout in elections) and by increased support for the current political order. However, in international comparisons Britain does not rank especially highly on measures of social trust, social participation or sense of civic duty.

A sense of belonging to Britain is not associated with particularly xenophobic attitudes, nor is it associated with distinctive political positions (other than on European integration and maintenance of the union) or with many other aspects of social participation or values. However, there is some evidence that it is associated with an 'ethnic' rather than a 'civic' conception of the nation.

The predominant conception of Britain is one that sees both ethnic (such as ancestry) and civic (such as respect for political institutions) criteria as important. Ethnic conceptions tend to be somewhat backward looking, taking pride in Britain's history, and tend to be exclusive. Primarily civic conceptions of the nation tend to be more inclusive, and countries that have more strongly civic conceptions also exhibit high levels of 'good citizenship'.

The evidence base is not yet sufficiently strong for firm policy recommendations. But policies should, perhaps, be considered which address the weak sense of belonging on the part of people born overseas in non-Commonwealth countries, of second-generation minorities (especially those of Caribbean heritage) and of the economically marginal. These policies might well include both 'direct' ones aimed at strengthening national identity and 'indirect' ones aimed at tackling some of the root causes of lack of belonging.

Any reforms need to consider not only how to strengthen British identity but also what form of identity should be encouraged.

By Professor Anthony Heath and Jane Roberts

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