Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Is it time to ditch the eternal quest to define the English?

How English are you?

A question that might sound like a tiebreaker in a pub quiz - “Bad luck. The answer we were looking for is 100 per cent” - is actually a headline from the traditionalist- leaning Telegraph.

In a week in which most news consumers were being invited to contemplate the eclipse of Western civilisation as they know it, the patriotic daily’s four-word poser sparked what it termed “a passionate debate about identity among readers”.

It is a debate almost as old as Britain’s political union and the subsequent invention of a British identity. But latterly it has served as a signifier of opposing views about the benefits or perils of cultural diversity and inward migration.

Although renowned for pulling together in times of domestic and international crisis, it seems the inhabitants of Shakespeare’s ‘scepter’d isle’ will always find time to address the centuries-old conundrum of who they truly are.

Older, more conservative white people may tend to assert their Englishness over their Britishness at times, but the former has not translated politically into the aggressive nativism seen elsewhere.

The Telegraph itself offered some bland options to determine Englishness. Did its readers enjoy a pint of beer after work? Were they staunch royalists and partial to Earl Grey tea? Or perhaps they obsessed about the weather or cricket or tended to be excessively polite.

Perhaps the Telegraph was itself displaying a further characteristic that the English like to value about themselves - their self-deprecating sense of humour.

Braverman’s self-defined status

The latest upsurge in this long-running identitarian debate is, however, more than a laughing matter. It was fuelled by the assertion of former hardline Conservative home secretary Suella Braverman that, although born and raised in England, her descent from the Indian diaspora meant she would never be English.

Notorious in office for her obsession with ‘stopping the boats’ of cross-Channel asylum seekers in order to stem what she called a migrant ‘invasion’, Braverman insisted that, “For Englishness to mean something substantial, it must be rooted in ancestry, heritage, and, yes, ethnicity - not just residence or fluency.”

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As a British Asian, Braverman said she did not feel English because she had no generational ties to English soil and no ancestral stories tied to the towns or villages of the land. (Maybe the Telegraph, which published her reflections, should have added those requirements to its English identity tick boxes.)

Braverman’s self-defined status did not deter her from opining that England, even more than the rest of Britain, was in the throes of an identity crisis, with the fallout of unprecedented migration, cultural fragmentation, and the collapse of multiculturalism leaving many wondering where the nation was headed.

“Of course I’m English”

While many of the Telegraph’s conservative readers might not disagree, some may have spotted the irony that her intervention was spurred by a broadcast contretemps over English identity between a Russian and a Scot.

The venue was a podcast hosted by right-wing British-Russian cultural warrior Konstantin

Kisin, during which he stated that former Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, the son of Asian immigrants, could not be considered English.

The Moscow-born polemicist, who defines himself as a free speech advocate, reinforced his point by describing Sunak as a "brown Hindu".

His Scottish guest, journalist and editor Fraser Nelson, argued that Sunak was English by virtue of his birthplace, just as Humza Yousaf, the former first minister of Scotland and Glasgow-born son of Pakistani immigrants, was undeniably a Scot.

Sunak subsequently weighed in by clarifying that "of course I'm English" during a wide-ranging interview in which he expressed regret for his government's 'stop the boats' rhetoric—"too "stark...too binary."

The dispute over birthplace versus ethnicity in defining Englishness is not confined to the conservative-minded podcasting chatterati.

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While in opposition, the current Labour foreign secretary, David Lammy, protested that there was no box on the multi-choice national census form for those like him who identified as Black English.

Criticising the ethnicity choices on offer, Lammy complained that there was a White English category as well as Black Welsh and Asian Welsh options but none for him, the London-born son of Guyanese immigrants.

In narrow terms, the term British is an expression of citizenship, while English is a much-disputed expression of nationality.

Orwell might have been right

What emerges from the current and possibly unresolvable hullabaloo over identity is that Englishness is more a state of mind than an ethnicity. Given the nation's mongrel origins and centuries of assimilating newcomers, it is difficult to pin down comprehensively anyone's ethnic roots.

At the end of World War II, the patriotic, socialist Englishman George Orwell, who could never have foreseen his reincarnation as a darling of the anti-woke right, wrote in his essay 'The English People':

"If the savage international struggle of the last twenty years continues, there will only be room in the world for two or three great powers, and in the long run Britain will not be one of them."

Surveying current geopolitical trends, it is tempting to consider that Orwell might have been right, even if his prediction was 80 years premature.

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Orwell identified a potential healing role for the English, with their characteristic tolerance, their predisposition towards supporting the underdog, and what he called their highly original quality of not killing one another.

But he warned that, "In a world of power politics the English would ultimately dwindle to a satellite people, and the special thing that

it is in their power to contribute might be lost."

Amid the present threatened global disorder, it might be better to ditch the futile debates over identity and focus on the shared values that bind the British and tie them to their allies in Europe and beyond.

As the Scot Fraser Nelson posted on X, quoting his own nation's motto expressing everyone's shared humanity: "We're all Jock Tamson's bairns".