Identity Crisis: I'm 'British', not 'English'

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer, Centre for Brexit Studies

Lockdown part one, when we were clapping on our doorsteps and putting rainbows up in our windows, as sad as it was, made me feel like I was a part of something. The whole nation was backing our NHS, cared about our frontline workers and we were just all a bit nicer to each other. Months on, approaching what is essentially Lockdown 2.0, I couldn't feel more different. In less than a year, the UK has gone from hating each other over Brexit, to loving and caring for each other, to feeling, yet again, more divided than ever before.

It's fair to say that I'm having somewhat of an identity crisis, and I don't think – or hope – that I'm the only one. Back when the UK voted to leave the EU, I was disappointed, as it was not what I voted for or wanted for my future. However, I accepted it and just hoped for the best. Leaving the EU for me though, makes me feel very isolated. I suddenly feel very stuck, on this very small island.

I just don't identify myself as 'English'. I never have, I always see myself as 'British', which I think is just more inclusive and accepting. I live in England…but I wouldn't say I'm English. So the prospect of the break-up of the UK makes me incredibly anxious, I don't want to be left here and feel so far away from our neighbours. Anne Applebaum from The Atlantic hit the nail on the head for me when she wrote: "The Brexit campaign was transformed from a fringe eccentricity into a mass movement by a handful of people who decided to make it into an argument about identity. Now Brexit itself has created a whole new set of questions about identity." (1)

Back in June 2016, Fintan O'Toole wrote in The Guardian (2) "When you strip away the rhetoric, Brexit is an English Nationalist movement". Perhaps that is the reason I do not feel English, because the English identity essentially encapsulates many things that I don't agree with. Being proud to be English nowadays, for me, feels dated and almost cringe worthy: "There is a commonly held belief that, for all its size and influence within the union, England is treated like an

embarrassing uncle at a wedding. It is fair to say that the politics of devolution over the past 20 years have focused attention on the identity politics of other parts of the United Kingdom. The appropriation of the St George's flag by elements of the far right has also intensified squeamishness for English nationalism." (3)

But is this desire to identify myself as anything but English more down to my age, as oppose to what I voted for in the EU Referendum? In a survey by the BBC, they found that the British identity is felt strongly by all generations – exactly the same proportion (83%) of both 18-24 year-olds and 50-64-year-olds report a powerful association with Britain. But when it comes to identifying as English, pride is weaker among the young (45%) and stronger among the old (72%). This is the reverse of the experience in Wales, where the strength of the Welsh identity reduces with age. In Scotland, over 80% of all age groups say they feel strongly Scottish. (4)

However, the political party you support does clearly play a role too: "In England, Conservative voters are much more likely to say they are proud to be English (77%) than those who support Labour (45%) and the Liberal Democrats (42%). Among leave supporters in the Brexit referendum English pride is 75%, among those who voted remain it is 44%." (5). I didn't vote to leave in the Referendum, and I didn't vote Conservative at the last election, so is it any wonder why I feel like my identity is different from my neighbours, family members and peers?

In the grand scheme of things, who cares what you identify as, right? But for those similar to myself, who are we when we leave the EU, continue to vote for the Conservative Party and Scotland, and possibly Wales and Northern Ireland too, leave us? Britain will be no longer, and the likes of me will be lone rangers.

Why can't you see yourself as British AND English I hear you cry? For me, they are totally different things: "Until not long ago, we were used to thinking of English and British as broadly the same thing and largely interchangeable. Over the past 15 years, it's been recognised that the identities hold different meanings, even for many people who consider themselves both. But the latest evidence suggests that, at the extreme, the two identities are becoming mutually incompatible." (6)

Regional identity has always fascinated me. I am from the Black Country, and the pride people have to be from the area brings me so much joy. Two weeks ago, I wandered into a shop in North Wales, and the shop assistant was wearing a Black Country flag pin on his shirt. Immediately, I knew I had something in common with this person and we instantly got along.

Spending four years living in Liverpool also made me very aware of local pride, which Scousers are particularly good at. In fact, I wouldn't even be the slightest bit shocked if Liverpool wanted to be independent from the rest of England. For me, the city always felt much more European than English and the people are a totally different breed in my eyes. Probably why I love the city so much, actually.

It is similar with Cornwall. Cornish nationalism is a cultural, political and social movement that seeks the recognition of Cornwall as a nation distinct from England: "Residents see themselves as having a Celtic cultural identity separate from that of England, and that the Cornish people have a national, civic or ethnic identity separate from that of English people." (7)

More recently, the most northerly part of the UK has voted decisively to consider declaring its independence from Scotland, with the Shetland Islands council backing a motion to begin examining options to achieve "financial and political self-determination". The move stems from a growing sense of frustration over cuts to its funding and moves towards centralised decision-making in Edinburgh and London. (8)

The growing desire for pockets of the UK to be able to do their own thing could very much increase over the next few decades. Could we see the regions that wanted to remain in the EU, especially the likes of London, slowly detach themselves from the wider country? Will devolution make regional pride much more important than an overall national identity too?

Just like the British flag, I would not hesitate to put a Black Country flag up and wave with pride – but I'd never even consider having an English flag. For me, the flag represents an incredibly divided country. Why do I gladly class myself as from the Black Country, where many people vote very differently from me, but not see myself as English?

Does identity really come down to where you feel like you have more in common with, and what you can associate with, as oppose to the wider country you live in?

In the years to come, what will really be our identities? Will we simply identify as the region we live in, as oppose to the wider country? Could the English flag, one day, represent much more than the divided country we have become? Will I ever truly see myself as English?

(1) https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/after-brexit-new-identity-crises-await-uk/605692/
(2) https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/18/england-eu-referendum-brexit
(3) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44306737
(4) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44306737
(5) https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/06/it-impossible-feel-both-british-and-english
(6) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44306737
(7) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornish_nationalism
(8) https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/scotland/shetlanders-make-a-bid-for-independence-62ljrvm0p?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1599811608