Born British

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Identity is an interesting thing. Like a patchwork quilt, we all have multifaceted identities that sit alongside each other (and often merge together). Some of these are identities we choose for ourselves (mods versus rockers, particular social identities that we clothe ourselves in etc.), whilst others are not (ethnicity, perhaps).

Sometimes identity is imposed on us. I might wish to identify as Cambodian, but ultimately I cannot. I could learn fluent Khmer, move to Phnom Penh, convert to Buddhism and throw myself into Cambodian culture with abandon but the simple reality is that however welcome I was made, most would continue to regard me as British.

Part of this relates to my colouring. I am "white" and have a complexion that would mark me as different. The rich world is not the only place in which appearance (including, but not limited to, skin colour) is intimately linked to identity! In the UK, these cultural identities are often complex.

I remember having a conversation about identity (in Amman, of all places) with a friend from London. She saw herself as simultaneously a Londoner, Muslim (religious affiliation), Pakistani (on her father's side), Japanese (on her mother's side) and British.

I then asked if she felt English[1], to which the reply was immediate:

"No. You're English but I'm not."

When I asked why that was the case, the reply was equally simple:

"You're white."

For better or ill the colour of my skin (and sometimes my hair colouring – the overwhelming majority of the world's population have black hair) marks me out as belonging to a certain group. It is a part of my identity. I have long wished that were not the case: I want to be able to choose my own identity and yet it is (at least in part) thrust

upon me. Of course, our identity varies depending on the social context we're in and we can emphasise various facets of it.

For example, I choose not to emphasise my religious affiliation in most circles, although it is an important part of my life. It tends to be misunderstood: people tend to assume that they know what my views are on a number of subjects, lumping me alongside those whose views I often find distasteful. I am a strong proponent of gay marriage, for example, and my support for this is predicated on my religious beliefs.

Often, the distinction between the "national" and the "regional" is, at best, uncertain. In Europe, this is often explicit – the UK is hardly unique (or even unusual) in this regard. One can be simultaneously Bavarian and German, but the strength of these identities will vary from case to case. I find the "English" portion of my identity unsettling for precisely the reasons elucidated above. It is an "exclusive" identity.

It is an ethnocentric identity – an identification chosen not by myself but by others who impose that identity on me. I feel a shudder of distaste when I walk past the St. George's flags hanging out of windows on my estate: I know what they represent. This is sad as there should be nothing wrong with celebrating culture, and English culture has a huge amount to recommend it.

In contrast to "Englishness", "British" has increasingly become a pluralistic identity. It has had to be. Britishness has had to embrace not just the "southern English" identities of the Thames estuary, but also the Welsh-speakers of Gwynedd, the Valleys communities that Aneurin Bevan hailed from, the miners of Yorkshire, farmers from the West Country and shipbuilders along the Clyde. More recently, it has grown yet wider.

As my friend pointed out, 'Britishness' was sufficiently broad to enable her to embrace all facets of her identity. One's ethnic background does not determine one's Britishness. To take a famous recent example, Stormzy is 100% as British as I am: nobody could credibly claim otherwise. Of course, I do not for one second want to suggest that the UK is some paragon of virtue in this respect. Racism and wider prejudice is endemic here as it is everywhere else. Nor, like any form of national identity, is the term "British" free of historical baggage.

The crimes committed in the name of the British Empire are well known: the Amritsar massacre, the invention of the concentration camp[2], failure to alleviate famine (even as late as the 1940s), subjugation of many African peoples and the treatment of indigenous peoples (not least the Maori of New Zealand) around the globe to name just a few.

Prior to Wilberforce, the British played an active role in the slave trade (although it is to their credit that the Royal Navy later sought to disrupt this and British influence was pivotal in ending the Arab slave trade out of Zanzibar in the early 20th century).

For many Irish people, even into the 21st century, the term 'British' is loaded with a negative historical significance. Nevertheless, for all its historic baggage, British identity is actually much broader and more diverse than many of its counterparts elsewhere in Europe and the world. To be American is to pledge allegiance to "the flag" – most Brits would consider that to be a bit of a joke (and one in poor taste at that).

Likewise, the French conception and contemporary implementation of laïcité is problematic for many Muslim citizens. Much of that simply would not fly on this side of the Channel. Whilst the UK has its challenges, being a proud British Muslim is not a contradiction in terms. To be British does not necessarily entail giving up one's heritage or an attachment to one's country of origin. Contrary to the beliefs of Norman Tebbit, it is quite possible to support the Indian (or Pakistani) cricket team and remain resolutely British.

Yet that pluralistic identity is under threat in a way that it has never been during my lifetime. Britishness is being subsumed under a much narrower national identity. 'Global Britain' is rapidly becoming 'Little England'. I was born British. My son was born as that identity crumbles. I very much doubt that it will still be around when he grows up.

[1] The backdrop to this question was the 2011 Holyrood election campaign, in which the SNP looked on course to win an overall majority (which they did) and were arguing for an independence referendum. Given this, I wondered what her identity would have been had Scotland voted for independence at the time.

[2] During the Boer War: although note the distinction between these ‘concentration camps’ and the later ‘death camps’ of the Nazis.