

# The Power of Belonging

Identity, citizenship and community cohesion

Ben Rogers and Rick Muir



## Executive summary

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**Any omissions and errors remain our own.**

# Executive summary

A ‘new identity politics’ has emerged in Britain over the last decade or so. It has evolved from within Britain’s liberal and social democratic traditions and maintains that we need to do more as a society to foster a common sense of belonging and shared civic identities. Shared identities are thought to contribute to a number of progressive goals, such as fostering communities in which people from different backgrounds get along well together, encouraging citizens to participate actively in public life and generating wider support for a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and income.

This new identity politics is not without its critics – some on the right claim that it is a typically corrosive left-wing attempt to meddle with tradition, while others on the left claim it amounts to a return to a conservative politics of cultural assimilation. In this short report we set out to test the claims of those who support this new agenda and interrogate its potential for furthering liberal and social democratic goals.

## Challenges to citizenship

Philosophers, politicians and policymakers have become increasingly concerned by the rise of individualism and a decline in norms of solidarity, cooperation and civic participation. This debate about citizenship has more recently come to focus on whether ‘multiculturalism’ might pose a threat to social solidarity. We argue that there is no evidence of a trade-off between multiculturalism on the one hand, and community cohesion on the other. Multiculturalism can also go hand in hand with support for redistribution and the welfare state. However, in the absence of countervailing measures, high levels of social inequality and rapid rates of population change may pose a challenge to social solidarity that progressives have a responsibility to address.

## Civic life and community cohesion in contemporary Britain

There has been an overall decline in levels of social capital (norms of trust and cooperation and strong social networks) in Britain and we are witnessing a growing class profile to political participation. In terms of community cohesion, we find a mixture of positive and negative trends. On the one hand Britain has successfully managed a relatively high rate of inward migration which has brought enormous benefits in terms of economic prosperity and the increased diversity of our communities and cultural life. This has happened without the kind of significant racist or xenophobic backlash that we have seen in other countries, and the British people are more tolerant, liberal and supportive of cultural diversity than at any time in the past. However, we have also seen evidence of inter-ethnic conflict in some parts of the country, a growing vote for the far right, widespread opposition to further immigration and a growing sense of alienation among young British Muslims. While in many ways Britain is doing well compared to other European countries, community cohesion and norms of citizenship and solidarity are under pressure.

## Routes to citizenship and solidarity

How might governments go about fostering norms of citizenship and solidarity? Economic and social justice are crucial foundations for community cohesion and a culture of common citizenship – but are not on their own sufficient. This is because we also need to tackle prejudice head on by challenging and changing attitudes. Furthermore, progressives are unlikely to be able to secure public support for

greater social justice in the first place in the absence of widely shared norms of citizenship and solidarity. We therefore need to promote *cultural change* as well as economic redistribution.

The state might set about fostering such cultural and attitudinal change in three main ways. First, it can promote contact and interaction between people from different backgrounds to break down barriers. Second, it can foster a set of shared values – but we argue these values on their own lack the motivational power to bind a community together. Finally, identity has a role in fostering solidarity and a sense of common citizenship. Identities are important for well-being, providing us with the value frameworks – the concepts and categories – that allow us to make sense of the world and give meaning to life, they give us social standing and respect and are a condition for the tight bonding we expect and desire with others. Identities offer a particularly powerful way of generating social solidarity because they operate at the level of the emotions and affective group attachments. And shared civic identities have a greater potential reach than measures to promote contact and interaction, which may only affect a small number of direct participants.

### **Multiculturalism and citizenship**

Multiculturalism, understood as the public recognition of and support for minority cultural identities, has come under intense attack in recent years – especially since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. There are certain forms of multiculturalism that have very definite shortcomings and dangers: we should not allow respect for cultural difference to lead to abuses of universal human rights, nor should we allow public support for different cultural groups to lead to social segregation. However, neither of these things is inherent to a multiculturalist approach, nor is there empirical evidence to support the claim that multiculturalist policies lead to fragmented communities. And indeed none of this detracts from the fundamental value of multiculturalism – that the state should honour and respect the diversity of cultures and identities in our society.

### **Common national and local belonging**

A multiculturalist politics should be combined with a politics of common national and local belonging. Despite globalisation, national and local identities continue to have a strong resonance with people in this and other countries. We reject the claim that national identities are somehow inherently militaristic or chauvinistic and believe they can be combined with the multiculturalist approach.

There are a number of basic imperatives for progressives regarding national identity: we need to find new and more inclusive sources of British national identity, we need to find new ways in which the state can promote these in practice, and we need to ensure that the practice of fostering such a shared identity is a democratic and participatory one.

The potential of local identities as a source of common belonging has been much neglected. These are by far the most popular territorial identities and there is much that could be done at the local level to promote a common sense of local citizenship. Local authorities should use their public voice to help foster an inclusive understanding of local identities and they should promote inter-cultural contact through the way they design public services and plan their towns and cities. They should be given much more power to help shape a distinctive sense of place.

### **Ways forward**

We set out a number of recommendations for how national and local government can act to promote a common sense of belonging.

## National identity

### A new constitutional settlement

Gordon Brown has placed constitutional reform at the heart of his programme for government and has linked this with the need to promote a renewed sense of Britishness. A new constitutional settlement could in theory act as an important progressive source of national identity. In the United States, a written democratic constitution and a bill of rights are something with which all citizens can identify, regardless of culture, religion or ethnicity. Realistically, however, given current levels of political disengagement it is unlikely that a government-led process of constitutional reform will carry great power in the terrain of identity in the UK. Even so there are three ways in which constitutional reform might make a contribution to fostering national identity. First, if the process of reform is a genuinely participatory one, engaging citizens, then it could help us think more explicitly about the kind of society we are and would like to become. We advocate the use of a citizens' assembly of 200 citizens, selected by lot, to deliberate over key constitutional reform proposals. This body could act as a focal point for national debate and would make recommendations that could be submitted to Parliament or voted on in a referendum.

Second, the act of removing historical anachronisms such as the place of bishops in the House of Lords could place multiculturalism at the heart of our constitutional arrangements, and by doing so help pluralise our understanding of Britishness.

Finally, by opening up new channels of political participation, more and more citizens could be brought into the decision-making process and people from different backgrounds could come together more frequently to discuss issues of common concern. Over time this could act as an ingredient in fostering a shared sense of identity.

### Celebrate our democratic heritage

If we are to foster an understanding of our national identity based on democratic values, we should do much more to celebrate Britain's democratic heritage. In practical terms this means that the Government should put in place a new funding stream to support projects that tell the story of how our political rights were won and at what cost, potentially financed through the National Lottery. This would be a 'bottom-up' process, with applications being invited from civic organisations, community groups, schools and local authorities, leading in time to new public statues, works of art or dedicated heritage sites to celebrate this aspect of our history.

### A national civic day

The Government should establish a national civic day as a new public holiday during which local communities would be encouraged to celebrate what Britain means to them, and citizens would be thanked for and encouraged to take part in voluntary service. Its function would be to encourage voluntary action and a greater sense of community, to encourage us to reflect on what we value about our society and to put diversity at the heart of our understanding of modern Britain. The national focus of the day would provide a unique moment, which we arguably lack at present, to reflect on our common history, fate and values.

The day could be held on the Monday following Remembrance Sunday. This builds on an existing commemoration rather than imposing something new and artificial. It is evocative in that it marks the outbreak of peace after the First World War and it applies equally to each nation within the UK. While careful consultation with the Royal British Legion should take place, it should not in principle distract attention from Remembrance Sunday, which would remain a separate commemoration in the civic calendar.

### A new honours system

The awarding of civic honours plays a valuable role in identity formation because it says something about who we are by setting out what we value as a society. Our current system is too complex, poorly understood and is mixed up with outdated notions of hierarchy, patronage and empire. We therefore recommend a smaller number of honours, that they should no longer refer to empire or the military, that they should be decided transparently by a representative panel of citizens, and that they should be detached from the conferment of seats in the upper house and social titles. All honours should be awarded on a single national day to focus attention on the value of public service.

### Rethinking state–citizen encounters and introducing new civic rites

How we interact with the state sends important messages about the values that should, and largely do, hold us together. We suggest giving a more meaningful cast to a number of current state–citizen encounters. For example, the state could do more to mark the registration of a new-born child, which could act as a point at which parents and the state commit to bringing up a child and supporting it throughout his or her life. We should think seriously about moves to make voting more ‘convenient’, which arguably encourage perceptions of voting as an essential ‘private’, consumerist act. Government should instead explore ways of framing voting as a civic duty, by making it compulsory, for example, or by re-designing the process of voting from the point of arrival of a polling card to the communication of the election results.

### A youth community service

We believe that adding some form of community service element to the compulsory school curriculum would help instil a greater sense of active citizenship among young people. They would be able to choose what kind of contribution to the wider community they would like to make and would be required to put in a certain number of hours over the course of their studies.

### A *One Britain* campaign

Research has repeatedly shown that direct, consistent and authoritative leadership from the top can help beat racism and dispel myths around asylum and immigration. A multicultural understanding of Britishness that defines itself in large part through its cultural diversity requires an urgent and upfront campaign by the Government.

### Culture, sport and heritage

A shared civic identity will not simply have its sources in political institutions, but also in shared literary and artistic canons, sporting allegiances and our natural and built environments. Our museums, libraries and galleries can provide a safe and trusted space for people to reflect on the diversity of cultures that make up contemporary Britain. If our natural heritage is to provide a common source of identity we need to do much more to ensure access to the countryside for black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people and children from inner-city areas. Because of the powerful role of sport in national and local identity formation, the Government should work harder to ensure that our national sports are accessible to people from all backgrounds.

## Local identity

### Devolution

One way of building on that strong sense of local allegiance felt by many Britons would be to accelerate the process of ‘double devolution’ on which the Government has embarked following the recent local government White Paper and the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government. Giving local authorities the power to act as genuine ‘place shapers’, to use Lyons’s phrase, by having greater fiscal and political autonomy,

would help them make their distinctive mark on a local area and build a uniquely local sense of civic pride and identity.

#### Fostering shared identity through contact

Local authorities are particularly well placed to make changes that will help bring people into contact with one another and thereby build social capital. This in turn should reduce prejudice and challenge stereotypes, creating the conditions through which an inclusive understanding of local identity can develop. For example, urban space should be planned in such a way as to maximise daily contact between citizens and local education authorities should act to ensure that children mix and are able to form friendships with pupils from different backgrounds to their own.

#### Using the local authority's public voice to foster civic pride and identity

On the basis of democratic election, local authorities have a uniquely legitimate and authoritative voice that enables them to speak on behalf of the whole community. They should be using this to directly challenge prejudice and foster an inclusive understanding of local identity.