

## Gordon Brown's Britain

By Christopher Harvie,  
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I

When Gordon Brown [1] first approached the national question – and there *is* a history – he didn't home in on the revival of democratic political thought in Scotland, notably around the Scottish Constitutional Convention (1989-93). Tom Nairn's essays, Alasdair Gray's novels, and the lively feminism which ensured a 40% female parliament were influential on Charter 88 – encouraging active citizenship, open government and electoral reform. But instead he took to Linda Colley's bestseller *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1688-1837* [2].

After its publication in 1992 this robust work became a central text of whatever sustained attention New Labour gave to the constitutional ethos. Colley was, like her husband the historian David Cannadine, and TV's Simon Schama [3], a protégé of that worldly, though latterly very rightwing don, Cambridge's Sir Jack Plumb [4].

She attracted the London-based constitutional optimists, who sought a painless remodelling of the United Kingdom in a touchy-feely way, since her message seemed to be that the old Protestant-military-imperial paint had to be replaced by something more contemporary. But suppose the analogy wasn't with the paintwork but with the internal reinforcement of a ferro-concrete building? And what if the now-corroded rods were those of industry and class?

**Christopher Harvie is responding to the speech [5] made by Gordon Brown, the United Kingdom's chancellor of the exchequer, at the Fabian Society's conference on "Britishness" in London on 14 January 2006 [6]**

Colley's [7] historiography, though gutsy, was partial. Her illustrations were great, but at a closer look they *all* came from London. She stressed trade and patriotism rather than manufacturing, and discounted divisions within Protestantism, which got worse just after her story ended: the Disruption in Scotland, the "treason of the Blue Books [8]" in Wales. On the major constitutional change of her period, the incorporation after a bloodbath of unwilling Catholic Ireland, 1800-1, she was near-silent. She went on to endorse Anglocentric flapdoodle like Sir Roy Strong's [9] *The Story of Britain* (1996) and she has not tried to defend her thesis when attacked, claiming to be "impartial" by being unacceptable to Scottish nationalists like your man *and* unionists such as Michael Gove MP [10]: a debating manoeuvre, not an argument.

Things got really silly with another Plumb discovery. The egregious Niall Ferguson told the readers of the *Sunday Telegraph* on 1 January 2006 [11] that Scotland ought to be "liquidated", basing part of his diatribe – argument isn't the word – on a claim that Robert Burns:

"was too universal a man to be consistently a Scottish nationalist. He alternated between half-cut Braveheart mode ('Scots Wha Hae wi' Wallace Bled') and deep cynicism ('Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!')."

Ferguson [11] is certainly a polemicist. His claim to be a historian is slighter. Burns wrote *Scots Wha Hae* in July 1793 to support "British" radicals under attack from William Pitt, and it was first published in the London *Morning Chronicle* in May 1794. It is not anti-English but anti-monarchic – the enemy being "proud *Edward's* power" – and its argument is practically identical to *Rule Britannia* (1740) by James Thomson [12], Burns's Whig hero. Tom Moore praised it in 1841 as "a song which in a great national crisis, would be of more avail than all the eloquence of Demosthenes". *A Parcel of Rogues* was an attack not on the Scots but on the noblemen who had sold out the Scottish parliament in 1707, the anticipators of Ferguson's position.

For Ferguson to get both of his key quotations wrong suggests scholarly incompetence as well as lack of scruple. But cometh the hour, cometh the man. The person who must have wanted to give the pup six of the best was nice school-captain David Cameron [13], since it's only the Tory list members of the Scottish parliament who stand between him and Little England.

II

It was another Tory, Samuel Johnson [14], who growled that patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel, and this unpleasant odour usually accompanies the unfurling of the Union Jack – both with the professional politico trying it for size, and the real enthusiast throwing up in disgust. Brown will never really escape the shadow of "I'm backing Britain!" [15] in 1968, in which Harold Wilson did the John Bull bit in the company of Labour's favourite psychopath, Captain Robert Maxwell, MC, MP; not least because a once-prominent Maxwellite, Geoffrey Robinson MP [16], remains his useful ally at the *New Statesman*.

That old but certainly English grouch Philip Larkin [17] probably had something like Cap'n Bob in mind when he wrote in 1972 [18]:

"On the Business page, a score  
Of spectacled grins approve  
Some takeover bid that entails  
Five per cent profit and ten  
Per cent more in the estuaries ...  
...  
... before I snuff it, the whole  
Boiling will be bricked in  
Except for the tourist parts –  
First slum of Europe: a role  
It won't be hard to win  
With a cast of crooks and tarts."

In fact Brown, Blair and Ferguson represent a typically Scots attitude to patriotism, which stems from the country's origin [19] as an ethnic confederation rather than a race-based state. Holding five races in some sort of harmony (Scots, Picts, Norse, Britons, and Angles) was unique in medieval Europe, and was achieved by doing deals, treaties, covenants, what you will. The Scots came on the scene not as noble Romans (and the eloquent Calgacus [20] is more Tacitus than Caledonius) but as *foederati* or "treaty people", and their greatest constitutional document, the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) [21] is essentially a defence of such agreements, based not on the monarch but on the authority of the "community of the realm" [22].

But if you are in an achieving society, when does treaty-making stop? If you can't insert the proverbial Rizla between the theoretical argument of *Rule Britannia* and that of *Scots Wha Hae*, why not continue making ever-wider treaties, and write poems about them? That way commercial imperialism lies, and there will always be some sharp Scot naming his price for

selling out. Who is the US Republican / Chinese Taipan who unnerves 10 *and* 11 Downing Street but the grandson [23] of Patrick John Murdoch, founder of the Free Kirk of Australia?

Curiously, though, the exemplary vendor of this thin brew looks more like Tony Blair. No less Glaswegian through ancestry than Brown, Blair could play Thomas Hardy's sentimental Scotch schemer Donald Farfrae [24] to the life, while his vast, laconic chancellor resembles Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge *and* the autochthonous spirit of an older Saxon England.

Brown's recent arguments, presented in his speech [25] at the Fabian Society's day-long exploration of "Britishness" on 14 January 2006 in London – are those of reiteration (which Lloyd George considered typically English) not analysis, and on closer inspection a less than inspired Whiggish rehash. James Joyce was mauled by Ireland, but would feel even more mauled by seeing Henry Grattan become "Lord Grattan", and whatever would he make of the chancellor's purposes for the Union Jack: "by definition, a flag for tolerance and inclusion"? Doing the Lambeg Walk, so to speak.

But one senses, and sympathises with, something troubled at the centre. Let's say the failure to curb the excesses of the City, its bonus culture, and flash young dealers in Porsches, "earning f\*cking millions for England! " Could a stern minatory patriotism not keep this lot in line and give those on the margins (far more than the chancellor [26] and his buddies in the Office of National Statistics care to count) some sense of belonging to the place?

III

There *was* such a moment of Britishness. It lasted from 1939 until 1973, and it was grounded in the "people's war [27]", the 1945 Labour victory, and the "British" and "national" in Clement Attlee's programme of public ownership and social reform: the citizenship through welfare entitlement of TH Marshall and Tony Crosland.

It also applied to some extent to the subsequent retreat from empire, in the values that were handed over to the successor states, or those claimed by the new wave of immigrants from them.

Both were distinct from Europe's shambolic imperial twilight and the, in retrospect callous, *Gastarbeiter* programme: work but no status. But Britishness's last trump was Winston Churchill's funeral in 1965, followed (with the 1970s entry to Europe) by stagflation and Celtic discontent (constitutional and otherwise); the triumph of "politics is personal" rapidly buried it.

**Also by Christopher Harvie in openDemocracy:**

"Journeys to the Rhine [27]" (January 2002)

"Looking into Wales: a nation displayed [27]"  
(March 2002)

"Remembering Robin Cook [27]" (August 2005)

"The German solution? [27]" (September 2005)

"A Scottish-Chinese dream: Maglev made easy [27]" (January 2006)

Among Christopher Harvie's many books are *A Short History of Scotland* [28] (OUP, 2002), *Deep Fried Hillman Imp* [29] (Argyll, 2004) and *Mending Scotland* [30] (Argyll, 2005).

Christopher Harvie's homepage is [here](#) [31]

Can it be revived? Well ... who owns our utilities? Who owns our football teams? Who plays for them? Who controls our newspapers, our publishers, our bookshops? Who will get the contracts for running a "marketised" National Health Service? Brown has fine words for the voluntary sector, the cooperatives, the churches – in fact for just about everyone in retreat from the City-and-supermarket society he more than anyone has facilitated, its reduction of citizens to customers and yooof to a captive market for MTV cybertrash.

Can loyalty be incubated in a British-European form, rather like [Jürgen Habermas's](#) [32] German "constitutional patriotism" which simultaneously evokes trust in democratic values and legitimate suspicion of the German past? This is, typically, something that the chancellor hasn't taken on board at all. In fact, much of 1997-2005 has been devoted to misunderstanding – when not snubbing – our closest associates.

Brown accompanies this with devotion to an oversimplified United States of America. Forget Walt Whitman or Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dorothy Parker or Studs Terkel, Count Basie or Billie Holliday, Patricia Highsmith or Raymond Chandler, the disputants in that fascinating *mélange*: what goes for Gordon is closer to Calvin Coolidge's "the business of America is business", with a bit of Wal-Mart productivity thrown in and some superman stuff from Ayn Rand, the creepy guru to Alan Greenspan. If that's what's visible from the Brown summer domicile in Cape Cod, it's rather like viewing Europe from the Orkneys.

#### IV

Let's try a modest civic patriotism which is one of several loyalties, from the *kleine Erdburger* (little earth-citizen), as German babies are often announced – which recalls Scotland's best national anthem, Hamish Henderson's *Freedom come all ye!* [33] – through European to civic nationality or urban republicanism.

[Fernand Braudel](#) [34] once said that Europe had had five centuries of city-states to one (horrifying) century of nationalism. So why not five patriotisms? The 15th-century Siensese Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *The Benefits of Good Government* [35] hangs on my study wall. Seeing the new local railway Heilbronn has built makes me feel proudly Swabian – "We can do anything but speak German!" I've tried – God knows I've tried – to prod Scotland into cognate action; and feel English enough to be furious that the folk of Leeds and Liverpool have to thole "Scotland the sleekit", [Alistair Darling](#) [36], as the transport minister who's wrecking such schemes wholesale.

Construct what patriotism you like out of that. Think, Gordon, that a fellow Fifer, James Lorimer, proposed the first European senate, a secular imperium to displace the papacy, in 1884; and that another Scot, James Bryce, wrote the best book on American politics, *The American Commonwealth* [37] four years later. European polity needs the conventions of flexibility and adaptability which come out of the contested cultures of these Anglophone islands, not a cash-register under a red-white-and-blue shroud.

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#### Links:

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[2] <http://www.yalebooks.co.uk/yale/>

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- [15] [http://www.sterlingtimes.org/memorable\\_images33.htm](http://www.sterlingtimes.org/memorable_images33.htm) target=\_blank
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