

## England: letting go

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Like many people in the world, I am an outsider. So I was interested in the flavour of belonging I found in [Solana Larsen's piece](#) [0] on Denmark. I was born in Denmark to a Danish mother and a Scottish father and have lived most of my life in England. The concept of nationality used to torment me. These days I'm just bemused by it.

It seems to me that there is a link between having a national identity and having a royal family, but not a necessary link, and one which may differ from country to country. To my mind, this has to do with differences in national identity.

It has always struck me how much clearer national identity is in Denmark than it is in England. Every nation is an 'imagined community', to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase, because it is too large a group for everyone to know each other. But some communities are easier to imagine than others. Denmark is a nation state with a fairly small territory and a fairly small population which, even now, is much less divided by wealth, class, ethnicity and so on than England.

Danish culture is not interested in glory, but in a kind of domestic and social comfort which the untranslatable word *hygge* pinpoints. Danes also largely feel part of the political process - I remember my grandmother, in her 90s, calling up to discuss Maastricht, only to find none of us in England knew what she was talking about.

Both of these things are expressions of Danish national identity. And it seems to me that the monarchy in Denmark is dependent on this national identity in that it either participates in furthering it or it becomes irrelevant to it. My feeling is that Danish identity would not fundamentally change without a royal family.

### The English exception

England, I think, is different. The English, to my knowledge, have never had a national identity. In addition to being hopelessly divided within themselves, they seem always to have been confused about Englishness and Britishness. When nation states across Europe were busy arming themselves with national identities, Britain, like Austria-Hungary and Russia, was stuck with an empire which it had to try to pass off as a nation using the values of the dominant culture. A lot of people don't feel part of a community like this, so after a while they leave.

This seems to have left England with an identity crisis, caught somewhere between a bloated idea of Britishness and a narrow idea of Shire-Englishness which alienates much of the country. No wonder there is so little engagement in the political process in a country which has such a vague idea of itself.

What doesn't help is that there are so many symbols that tempt the English to dream of a former identity. The Commonwealth, for example. The royal family above all; the unifying symbol on which so much of this dream depends. Monarchists cite the unifying force of this symbol as an

argument in their favour, but the problem is that the identity it is linked to is confused and backward-looking.

Meanwhile, new ideas of what it might mean to be English have been forming - especially in the cities, which have changed so much since I grew up in the 70s I find it hard to believe. Clinging defensively to the old symbols can only make the evolution of a new England, or Englands, more painful. Having the courage to let them go could make a new community easier to imagine. It would be an expression of faith.

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