



BRITISH HISTORY, LIBERALISM AND NATIONALISM: A RESPONSE TO THE PAREKH REPORT

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The *Parekh Report on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* was written by a commission set up in 1998 by the Runnymede Trust, with Bhikhu Parekh as chairman. Its aim was “to propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage and making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity” (*Parekh Report*, 2000, p. viii). When the report was published, last year, it caused a great deal of controversy and attracted a lot of hostile criticism. It seems to me, however, that most of the criticism did not quite reach the heart of the matter, so I now propose to make my own contribution to the debate. The report deals with a wide range of issues, but I want to focus on just two of them: Britain’s history, and the relationship between liberalism and nationalism.

ATTEMPTED THEFT OF A NATION’S HISTORY

The *Parekh Report* is partly predictable and partly surprising. The surprising thing about it is that it makes no mention of the Marxist argument that we owe immigrants a living because we used to “exploit” them when we ruled their countries. During the Cold War this was always one of the multiculturalists’ favourite arguments, but presumably the authors decided that they could not get

the public to swallow it nine years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, they still insist on trotting out the patronising *Guardian*-reader’s argument that we should be grateful for immigration because it “enriches” British society and makes it more “vibrant” (as if our way of life was not rich enough already), which crops up on the first page of the Preface, as quoted above. They add a new refinement to this argument by claiming that there has never been such a thing as a distinctively British way of life in the first place. The essence of their case is contained in the passages quoted below, which are taken from Chapters 2 and 8:

“How is Britain’s story imagined? Since it has many versions, and since these are constantly evolving to include recent developments, there is no straightforward answer. In the dominant version, however, there are several recurring themes. One is what a historian has recently described as a widespread, unthinking and unshakeable belief in the unbroken continuity’ of British history. People believe that Britain has been unified since time immemorial — hence the respect for tradition, for established social conventions and ancient institutions with roots in an ancestral past. They feel that this continuity has given the nation stability, and its people a striking cultural unity. A second theme is the notion that Britishness has been evenly diffused across the kingdom. Third, connected with this, specifically English experience has been readily understood as representing the whole United Kingdom. The fourth theme is that the British are an island race, their mentality shaped by a long and sturdy independence, free from foreign contamination.” (*Parekh Report*, 2000, pp. 17-18)

“Great Britain is the product largely of the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries. For most of prehistory, the geographical feature now known as the British Isles, or the British and Irish Isles, formed a promontory of the continental landmass. Separation occurred only 8,000 years ago. Culturally, the islands remained in-



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timately related to Catholic continental Europe until the Reformation — the break that made English nationalism possible, powerfully fuelled by anti-Catholicism and anti-French sentiment. For centuries before then England was dominated by France. English kings were vassals of French kings and not, as myth has it, the reverse. They and the ruling and professional classes commonly spoke French. The parliamentary tradition is an achievement of which the British are justly proud. However, the idea that Parliament was a uniquely British institution, with exclusive Anglo-Saxon roots, is not supported by the known historical facts. Parliaments, diets and assemblies were thick on the ground throughout late medieval and early modern Europe. The primacy of Parliament in Britain was achieved at the expense of civil war, a king's head, the persecution of Catholics and the crushing of revolt in Ireland. It did, however, help Britain escape the absolutism that dominated the rest of Europe in the 17th and 18th Centuries.”

(p. 19)

“There has never been a single ‘British way of life’. The idea that Britishness is universally diffused across society is seriously misleading. For there have always been many, often contested, ways of being British. Outside the heartland (earlier ‘the Home Counties’; more recently ‘middle England’), Britishness always existed alongside, and was strongly challenged by, the Irish, Scots and Welsh, and also by a range of local and regional loyalties. Identification with Yorkshire, the North-East, Manchester, Lancashire, the West Midlands, East Anglia and the West Country has co-existed with, and sometimes seems to override, national identity — there have been alternative versions of national identity not only within Britain but also within England itself. The achievements now said to characterise Englishness were staunchly resisted by some English people while being vigorously championed by others. For example, constitutional monarchy, religious toleration, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, trial by jury, freedom of the press — now considered the cornerstones of the political system — were achieved only through protracted struggle. English people experienced English liberties in significantly different ways. The majority were disenfranchised until the early 20th Century; the poor have always been socially excluded. The right to free assembly, to vote, the destruction of the old Poor Law, the outlawing of child labour, limiting working hours and improving working conditions, the National Health Service, the welfare state itself, are now all represented as great national achievements. Yet each was at one time the cause of bitter struggle between vested interests and sections of the British people — that is, between one sort of British person and another. Only after the dust had settled were such changes retrospectively incorporated into an all-embracing, essential Britishness.”

(p. 22)

“In the opening chapters of this report we have argued that some of the dominant stories in Britain need to be changed — stories about the past, the

present and the future. With regard to the past we have recalled a range of myths: that the history of Britain goes back many centuries; that it has always been a basically peaceful and lawful place, untroubled by internal dissent or strife; that there is a single true version of the national story; that until recently Britain was culturally homogeneous; that the sea round Britain aptly symbolises its independence and isolation from the rest of the world.” (p. 103)

“We have recalled in previous chapters the truth that Britain is a recent creation, and that colonialism and empire were integral to its making. Therefore virtually all current citizens of the United Kingdom are part of a single story — though their ancestors, of course, engaged with it in a range of different ways. A second truth is that there are several versions of the single story, several truths. There are different versions in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and according to class, gender, region and religion; and depending on whether British greatness was experienced at the centre or from the periphery. A third truth is that these islands have always been a place marked by unceasing dissent and argument.”

(pp. 103-104.)

These assertions are a collection of misleading half-truths. We all know that Britain is divided into England, Wales, Scotland and Ulster, and that the Irish never wanted to be British, but the people of the different regions of Britain still have far more in common with each other than they have with the French, the Germans, the Italians or the Spaniards. Of course, Britain has never been entirely free from political conflict, but there are very few countries in the world where there has been no successful foreign invasion for over nine hundred years, no civil war or revolution for over three hundred years, and no armed rebellion against the government for over two hundred years. Of course, England was subjected to a Continental overlord after the Norman Conquest, but institutions such as the English language, the common law and the counties of England all date from Anglo-Saxon times, and they were resilient enough to survive the Conquest and the centuries of French domination which followed it. The authors (probably deliberately) fail to distinguish between Britain's history as a united nation and the histories of its component parts. They are not even entirely accurate about the unification of Britain. It is true that the Scottish and Irish Acts of Union were passed in 1707 and 1801, and that Southern Ireland became independent in 1922, but some of the most important steps towards unity took place well before the 18th Century. Wales was united with England under the Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284, and in 1485 it was a Welshman, Henry VII, who finally got rid of the French Plantagenet dynasty and laid the foundations for England's rise to greatness. As for Scotland, the Union of Crowns took place in 1603, over a hundred years before the Union of Parliaments, and the first version of the Union Jack was designed just three years later.

The histories of England, Wales and Scotland before unification go back very much further. The Welsh are descended from the Ancient Britons who lived in Great Britain in prehistoric times, before the birth of Christ.

The English settled in England in the 5th and 6th Centuries after Christ. The Scots migrated from Ulster to Scotland at the same time, and over the next few hundred years they gradually assimilated the native Picts. In the 17th Century, thousands of them returned to their ancestral homeland and founded the Ulster Protestant community. England and Scotland were each united under a single king as long ago as the 9th Century, England under Egbert of Wessex in 829 and Scotland under Kenneth MacAlpin in 843.

Culturally, there is no doubt that Britain, like continental Europe, is part of Western civilisation, but most of its differences from the Continent date from well before the Reformation, and have nothing to do with the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. (The authors of the report seem to forget that there are many Protestant countries on the Continent.) As Alan Macfarlane said in *The Origins of English Individualism*:

“If the argument in the preceding chapters is correct, England has been inhabited since at least the 13th Century by a people whose social, economic and legal system was in essence different not only from that of peoples in Asia and Eastern Europe, but also in all probability from the Celtic and Continental countries of the same period.”

(Macfarlane, 1978, p. 165 — The author’s references to “the Celtic countries” are mainly about Ireland rather than Wales or Scotland.)

Macfarlane pointed out that in England, land was owned by individuals rather than families and could be bought and sold much more easily, and that English society was more mobile, wealth was more widely distributed, all sections of society were richer, and women had more rights. Richard Hodges later argued in *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* that England’s distinctive features did not in fact originate in the Middle Ages but even earlier, in Anglo-Saxon times. As he put it:

“The singular propensities which caught Macfarlane’s imagination were present in English society from its beginnings.” (Hodges, 1989, p. 9)

These “singular propensities” must explain why it was Parliament which emerged supreme in Britain in the 17th Century, rather than an absolute monarch, as on the Continent. There may have been many parliaments in late medieval and early modern Europe, but there are very few parliaments in Europe today which have existed continuously since 1254.

LIBERALISM AND NATIONALISM: FRIENDS OR ENEMIES?

In Chapter 4 of the report, the authors discuss several different models of the relationship between the political system and the national culture. They call two of them “the nationalist model” and “the liberal model”, and they say that over the last fifty years they have “vied for supremacy” (*Parekh Report*, 2000, p. 45). They give the following definitions of them:

“No political system can be stable and cohesive unless all its members share a common national culture, with a sense that everyone belongs to, and feels loy-

alty to, a single whole. There must be shared symbols and ceremonies to evoke and maintain the common loyalties, and the state has both a right and a duty to ensure that everyone assimilates into the prevailing national culture. Those who do not or cannot assimilate, shedding all vestiges of any alternative culture, cannot complain if they are treated like second-class citizens. This model may be called the nationalist view.” (p. 43)

“All that is required for a unified and cohesive political system is a common political culture. Fundamental to this view is a distinction between public and private spheres. There must be unity in the public sphere of political debate and in acceptance of the rules of decision-making, but there may be tolerance for substantial diversity in people’s private lives, and in the internal affairs of distinct communities. A contemporary philosopher has suggested the term ‘constitutional patriotism’ as a way of describing this model, which may be called the liberal view.” (p. 43)

They then reject the nationalist model on these grounds:

“The essential problem with the nationalist or assimilationist model, as we argued in Chapter 2, is that it is based on a false premise of what Britain is and has been. Britain is not and never has been a homogeneous and unified whole — it contains many conflicting traditions and is differentiated by gender, class, region and religion as well as by culture, ethnicity and race. Assimilation is a fantasy, for there is no single culture into which all people can be incorporated. In any case, it seldom leads to complete acceptance, for the demand for assimilation springs from intolerance of difference, and for the intolerant even one difference is one too many. Furthermore, assimilation cannot be justified morally. It attempts to suppress difference and condemns to second-class citizenship, in fact if not in law, everyone who does not accept majority norms. A fundamental practical problem is that assimilation cannot be pursued in an age of increasing globalisation. For no government, least of all the government of a state such as the United Kingdom, can insulate its citizens from cultural, religious and intellectual influences emanating from outside the state’s physical borders.” (pp. 45-46)

The authors make two assertions which I would like to challenge: firstly, that nationalism is in conflict with liberalism, and secondly, that nationalism means condemning some people to second-class citizenship. Before going any further, it is necessary to establish what we mean by liberalism. The trouble with the word “liberal” is that it changed its meaning some time in the early 20th Century. Classical liberals, whose political beliefs date from the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries, are a very different species of animal from 20th Century liberals. For example, in the field of economic policy, classical liberals believe in the free market, while 20th Century liberals believe in state control. For another example, on the subject of law and order, classical liberals believe in freedom from crime rather than freedom for criminals, but 20th Century liberals believe that the rights of criminals are much more important than the rights of victims. Since

the word “liberal” was first used to refer to classical liberals, I think it is only fair that their claim to it should take priority.

It is also necessary to establish what we mean by nationalism, because there is an important difference between two kinds of nationalism. Today, the multiculturalist intellectual elite are trying hard to turn “nationalist” into a dirty word by claiming that all nationalists are aggressive and xenophobic. Of course, we all know that some nationalists are aggressive and xenophobic, but not all nationalists are like that. Ever since the 19th Century, there has also been a classical liberal kind of nationalism which does not divide mankind into superior and inferior nations, but recognises that the people of every nation have an equal right to govern themselves and protect their way of life in their own homeland. Supporters of this kind of nationalism have included John Stuart Mill, Giuseppe Mazzini and Woodrow Wilson. To these distinguished liberals, the idea that liberalism and nationalism must necessarily be in conflict would have been incomprehensible. For example, take this passage from *Considerations on Representative Government* by John Stuart Mill:

“Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart. This is merely saying that the question of government ought to be decided by the governed. One hardly knows what any division of the human race should be free to do, if not to determine with which of the various collective bodies of human beings they choose to associate themselves. But, when a people are ripe for free institutions, there is a still more vital consideration. Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist. The influences which form opinions and decide political acts are different in the different sections of the country. An altogether different set of leaders have the confidence of one part of the country and of another. The same books, newspapers, pamphlets, speeches do not reach them. One section does not know what opinions, or what instigations, are circulating in another. The same incidents, the same acts, the same system of government affect them in different ways; and each fears more injury to itself from the other nationalities than from the common arbiter, the state.”

(Mill, 1861, p. 547)

Here Mill explains exactly why a common national culture is vital for political stability and cohesion — the very idea which the Parekh Commission denounces as incompatible with liberalism.

The Commission’s claim that assimilation is a fantasy, and that it seldom leads to complete acceptance, is refuted by the historical evidence. In the 16th Century, many Protestant refugees from the Netherlands and Germany settled in Britain, and they were later followed by French Huguenots and Jews from Eastern Europe. They were all

assimilated so successfully that today their descendants are indistinguishable from the rest of the population. Of course, this was possible because in those days there was no intellectual elite attempting to impose multiculturalism on everyone by force. As for second-class citizenship, nationalists of the classical liberal variety do not condemn anyone to this fate, because they believe that the people of every nation in the world have a right to an independent homeland of their own where they can be first-class citizens. The Commission’s final argument, that no government can insulate its citizens from cultural influences from outside the state’s borders, is perfectly true, but completely irrelevant. No one is proposing that the government should do anything of the sort. The point is that the British people should be free to choose for themselves whether to accept or reject foreign cultural influences, instead of having the decision taken out of their hands by a small minority of arrogant intellectuals.

NATIONALISM VERSUS MULTICULTURALISM

The controversy about the *Parekh Report* is only one small part of a much larger conflict between nationalism and multiculturalism which is going on all over the Western world. This, in turn, is part of a conflict between ordinary people and the intellectual elite about who has the power to control the kind of society we live in. The intellectual elite have an advantage in the propaganda war because they dominate the education system and the media, so it is vitally important to be prepared to refute their smears wherever you encounter them. At the moment, one of their main smears is that anyone who is against compulsory multiculturalism is a “racist”. If “racism” means believing in the supremacy of the white race, then this is completely untrue. Of course, people who do believe in white supremacy are against multiculturalism, but it is perfectly possible to be against it for other reasons. From a classical liberal point of view, it is not a question of believing yourself to be superior to other people; it is a question of wanting to live in a cultural environment where you feel at home. There is nothing “racist” about that, as long as you recognise that everyone else in the world, regardless of race or colour, has an equal right to do the same thing in their own homeland. As John Stuart Mill said, if people should not be free to choose whom they associate themselves with, what should they be free to do?

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