A reactionary brief for English cultural nationalism

Nor Shall My Sword--The Reinvention of England, by Simon Heffer

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12 May 1999

Nor Shall My Sword--The Reinvention of England, *by Simon Heffer, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999*

In his newly published book *Nor Shall My Sword--The Reinvention of England* Simon Heffer, deputy editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, has called for an aggressive resurgence of English cultural nationalism in response to the growth of Scottish nationalism. Rather than resisting what Heffer suggests is the inevitable drive to Scottish independence, the English should be glad to "be shot of the Scots".

Heffer's book is an unpleasant tract that bears all the marks of having been written in haste, to coincide with the elections to the Scottish assembly. But it is indicative of a growing anxiety within the British ruling class about the political implications of the Labour government's constitutional changes and the impact of globalisation on the British political system. Consequently, it has provoked an interest far beyond its merits. Extracts from it were published in the traditionally liberal *Observer* newspaper, suggesting that the question of English national identity has not only become important to the right-wing *Daily Telegraph*.

A more thoughtful piece than Heffer's appeared in the *Financial Times* on April 9. Philip Stephens drew attention to the lack of serious thought given by the Blair government to the constitutional implications of the historic changes that it is making so rapidly to the Union (of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), the House of Lords, local government and Europe. Stephens warns: "A dozen bills of constitutional significance have passed through parliament.... Beyond the walls of Westminster the response has been a yawn.... When the people wake up--and one day they will--they will do so with a jolt. The centralised unitary state on which Britain built its empire will have gone for good."

Turning to Tony Blair himself, Stephens writes, "And here we come to the central paradox. The author of this great transformation seems scarcely moved by its significance.... I cannot recall his last speech on the broad purpose of an upheaval as profound as anything Britain has witnessed since the 17th century."

Although Tony Blair is not interested in the historic significance of his legislation, this is not true for the British political elite as a whole--who have always tended to see their unwritten constitution in historical rather than theoretical terms because it is based on precedent rather than general principles.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historians of the calibre of Gibbon, Macaulay and Carlyle explored constitutional questions through their historical work: Gibbon in relation to Rome, Carlyle on France and Macaulay directly in his *History of England*. Constitutional questions are again taking centre stage in the work of historians, in a way they have not done for many years. The nature of the British state and its origins are becoming significant historical questions, as the possible political forms that may emerge in the event of its break-up become a matter of concern.

The historian E.H. Carr once said that British historians were invariably liberal, even the conservative ones. Since Britain lost its leading position in the world that is no longer true, but a group of right-wing historians that includes Heffer believe it is still too much the case. In recent years they have been revising the history of Britain and rooting out the last trace of this liberalism. Heffer is the author of several biographies. They include *Like the Roman-- the Life of Enoch Powell*;*Power and Place--The Political Consequences of King Edward VII* and *Moral Desperado--The Life of Thomas Carlyle*. For all its insubstantial character as far as facts, historical argument or logical reasoning are concerned, *Nor Shall My Sword* should be seen as a modern contribution to this historical debate. If it takes place on a lower intellectual plane than that set by the historians of previous centuries, this is because of the general cultural decline that has taken place in ruling circles.

Heffer's book is, at the same time, a specific expression of the crisis within the Conservative Party following its disastrous electoral defeat in 1997. He appeals for the Tories to take advantage of the fact that it has lost all its Scottish seats, and to reinvent itself as a specifically English nationalist party and advocate of English independence. Conservatives "are magically already an English party. The unhappy reasons for this need not be dwelt upon. They are in the past. What is important--and, sadly, this still has not happened--is for the Conservatives to recognise that, in this respect at least, there is no turning back the clock.... If it wishes to maximise its potential as a party interested in, and perhaps even one day exercising, power, then its foremost priority must be to establish itself as an English nationalist party" (pp. 91-92).

He derides any qualms that Tories might feel about going in this direction: "The party seems to shy away from English nationalism for the usual reasons--the distant sound of jackboots, imaginings of bonkers theories of racial superiority, and all that other nonsense. Only a few nutters in England identify with England in that sort of way, and there is no need to appeal to them" (p. 93).

Heffer wants to distance himself in public from the football hooligans and openly fascist thuggery, but the racism of his English nationalist programme is inescapable. He advocates a vigorous assertion of English cultural identity and warns immigrants that "those who came to a newly independent England would need to accept that they were entering a country that was not settled in the world like dear old, somewhat unsure-of-itself Britain, but which was passing through a period in which it had to reinvent itself as a separate entity" (p. 43).

His grim warning that ethnic minorities should expect to be harassed and intimidated in a newly "independent" England reflects the emergence of extreme right-wing tendencies from within the Tory party.

Heffer uses the customary devices of a right-wing demagogue to whip up racial antagonisms. He presents the English as the underdog, whose

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culture is under threat and whose good nature and tolerance are put upon by other less scrupulous nations. "Only thirty years ago," he writes, "children in English schools learned old English folksongs and sang them with gusto: now irrespective of whether or not they have children from ethnic minorities in their class, they are more likely to learn to sing African National Congress protest songs, and to study the religions of far-flung parts of the Orient" (p. 46).

To stop this cultural dilution, government should "devise and support the cultural projects, in schools, in the arts, in broadcasting and elsewhere, that would project the English temper, English attitudes and the English way of life both to the English people and to the world.... Education would be at the heart of this project, just as the SNP [Scottish National Party] intends it to be in Scotland. It would mean teaching English culture in schools--not just English literature, but English music, art, and of course, English history" (p. 126).

This policy would extend to broadcasting. No longer the BBC, but the English Broadcasting Corporation would be regulated by a new government department. "The EBC should be required to satisfy the Department of Culture that its musical output--popular as well as classical gives weight to English artists and composers" (p. 129).

Nowhere is England more of an underdog than in its relations with Scotland, which, according to Heffer, English taxpayers have been subsidising for years. He welcomes the prospect that an SNP victory would lead to a referendum on independence because, he claims, a Scottish breakaway would allow England to stop subsidising Scotland and an exclusively English government could cut taxes. "If the English can make a four pence in the pound tax cut out of Scotland's deciding to become independent, that is a cause for rejoicing rather than shame" (p. 73).

Behind Heffer's eagerness to be rid of Scotland there is another agenda, which becomes apparent when he writes about the welfare state. "The seeds of Britain's decline were propagated in England, not least by English liberals of the twentieth century--so different from their shrewd and ruthless predecessors of the Victorian age--whose guilt complexes and underdeveloped thought processes brought a welfare state and numerous other forms of crippling self-indulgence" (p. 52).

For Heffer, Scottish independence would mean not just being rid of the Scots in general, but those particular Scots that live in the major urban conurbations and industrial areas--the working class. Having removed them from the equation he believes it will be possible for a purely English state to roll back the frontiers of welfare provisions to an extent only dreamt of in the 1980s. His is the most open statement of the reactionary consequences of splitting the working class by national separatism.

It is not just the traditionally right-wing *Daily Telegraph* that has begun to protest at the supposed subsidy to Scotland. The same theme was taken up by the social democratic Fabian Society at a recent seminar, and by the liberal *Guardian* newspaper. The paper provided a detailed breakdown of the tax and public spending figures showing that in every region of England, except the North East, more was raised in taxes than was spent, whereas in Scotland this position was reversed. After Northern Ireland, Scotland was shown as the main beneficiary of this transfer of funds. Clearly, Heffer's book strikes a sympathetic chord in the political elite and amongst media pundits.

His demand that the English get their subsidy back is typical of the mean-minded egotism that characterises nationalism. It is comparable to the SNP's call for Scotland to have "its" oil revenue. This strain of English nationalism has arisen just at the time that the Scottish National Party is downplaying its call for independence because it has run foul of big business interests, who fear that it will raise taxes. Heffer's tax cut is much more in line with the interests of business, but both reflect the selfish scramble for resources that characterises national separatists everywhere.

In creating a Scottish parliament, the Labour government has channelled the contest for economic resources in a nationalist direction. Although the SNP will not control the incoming Edinburgh parliament, the very fact of devolution has put the question of Scotland's so-called subsidy on the political agenda. The origins of higher public spending in Scotland, in the decline of industries like coal, steel and shipbuilding coupled with extensive rural deprivation, have been pushed aside in discussions that centre on the rights and wrongs of the divisions of resources on national lines.

Heffer's aggressive English nationalism is the logical outcome of the Blair government's devolution policies. His appeal to the Tory (Conservative) party may well fall on stony ground, since the Tories seem unable to maintain a consistent policy from one day to the next, but that does not mean that his book is without political significance. The response to its themes in the press shows that he has won a hearing beyond the Tory party. In this sense, his book is more than just an appeal to the crisis-wracked Conservatives. It is an attempt to delineate the political landscape and set the agenda for New Labour as well. His answer to the problem of public apathy that Philip Stephens identified in the *Financial Times* is to develop cultural nationalism in the same way that the SNP has done in Scotland. Promoting an apparently downtrodden English national culture offers a way of making nationalism acceptable, especially to young people who are repelled by overt expressions of jingoism and racism. Heffer's aim is to manufacture an English culture that is as appealing as Celticism has become among young Scots.

To advocate the teaching of "English culture" in schools may seem reassuringly harmless, even aesthetically elevating. Shakespeare is universally regarded as a great dramatist. To deprive children of access to his works, as some teachers have done, under the guise of multi-culturalism and political correctness, is an act of philistinism. But equally, to identify the reason for studying Shakespeare as his nationality, rather than his artistic value, is no less philistine.

By its nature, art transcends the bounds of the nation that produced it. A consistent attempt to apply Heffer's "Englishness" test to culture would, moreover, mean that most art galleries would have to be cleared because they are full of Italian, French, Flemish and Dutch old masters. In the field of literature, a policy of Englishness would cut a swathe through texts that are now accepted as the essential classics. Many writers who currently feature in the curriculum, such as Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, would have to be banned since they are Irish.

Even if Shakespeare were permitted, what would become of those of his plays drawn from classical Latin sources, those set in the Mediterranean, those about Scottish kings or Danish princes? As for his sonnets, they are clearly an attempt to graft an alien Italian form onto the glorious English language. Coming to music--jazz, the blues and all the various forms of rock music would have to be excluded from schools or any publicly-funded performances, and kept off the airwaves of the new English Broadcasting Corporation. Handel, that mainstay of the English choral tradition, would have to be banned, for being German. Peter Maxwell Davies, one of the best known living composers in Britain, would be proscribed as a Scot. Those who wanted to hear his music would have to tune in to clandestine broadcasts from Radio Scotland. As for the old English folk songs of Heffer's fond memory, the culture police would have their work cut out to excise the non-English influences of the Irish and the Scots.

The same cross-cultural influences exist in all areas of the arts. Any attempt to constrain culture within prescribed national patterns, and to prevent these new influences from coming into it, leads only to stagnation or rebellion by the artists.

Heffer's dream of an exclusive and aggressively nationalistic English culture may seem like a particularly absurd example of English philistinism, but it has a grim pedigree. When the Nazis came to power in

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Germany they tried to purge all alien elements from German culture in exactly this way. Not only did they ban books, music and art works by Jews, but they attempted to expunge all references to the Jews or Israel from long-established components of German culture like the Bach cantatas. Under the Nazis, Deutsche Gramophon re-recorded the entire classical repertoire of German choral music with the new approved texts. Forms of art that were considered out of keeping with the German national spirit, because they dealt with modern themes or were socially critical, were classified as degenerate and banned. This is the direction in which Heffer is moving when he calls for English culture to be saved from dilution and neglect.

The media and political elite are casting around for a way to arouse enthusiasm for the Labour government's constitutional changes. They need to inject political life into what are essentially artificial constructions, intended to give a false impression of democracy, when real political power is moving ever further away from the mass of the population. Heffer is offering the only solution that is open to them. When a people cannot be persuaded to support a political system by the material benefits and genuine political participation it offers, they must be bound to it by a reactionary and exclusive ideology that preaches contempt and hatred of all other national, ethnic or regional groups and cultures.

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