Blair's musings on patriotism: old wine in new bottles

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Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered a speech on "Britishness" to a gathering of newspaper executives last month. His remarks were broadly seen as signalling the start of a long campaign for the next general election, expected in 2001, in which Labour will challenge the Conservative Party as the defenders of the "national interest".

Conservative leader William Hague has described the government's conditional support for Britain to adopt the European single currency, the euro, as a conspiracy to "sell out the British national interest". Similarly, he has decried Labour's setting up of devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales as weakening the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.

The Blair government has prosecuted the "British national interest" just as aggressively as its Tory predecessors. It has enthusiastically participated in every military conflict undertaken by Britain's major international ally, the US, during Labour's three years in office. Neither does its advocacy of entry into the euro zone represent the capitulation to Europe, and Germany in particular, which the Tories claim. Eventual membership of the euro is seen as vital if Britain is to successfully compete in European and world markets.

That Blair felt it necessary to respond to the charges of the Conservative opposition is more than simply a defensive reaction based on electoral considerations, however. It is an attempt to come to grips with more intractable problems facing the British bourgeoisie. The development of global economics has heightened the domination of the world market over all national economies, seriously undermining the old political programmes and institutions based upon the nation state.

In these circumstances, Blair warned, "modernisation" was not a matter of choice. The global integration of world production and economy means that it is not possible to "cling to the status quo", he said. "We are living through a period of unprecedented change. The exponential growth of information and communication technologies is transforming the world's economies and making them increasingly interdependent. The break-up of the post-war international order and globalisation are calling into question systems constructed around the nation state". The reality is that "the institutions of the nineteenth century will not survive us in the twenty-first," he concluded.

Blair was not seeking to herald the death-knell for the nation state or nationalism, but to reinvent it. His speech touched on three reasons why, he believed, it was vital to develop a "new modern patriotism". Broadly speaking these could be characterised as providing an ideological basis on which British capital can fight for its interests on the world arena, preserving the cohesion of the British state from separatist pressures, and preventing the deepening antagonisms between rich and poor from undermining the social fabric of British society.

There was no great original thought contained in Blair's speech. What he said served to indicate the scale of the crisis facing the British ruling class. On several occasions, Blair has acknowledged Britain's declining economic power vis-à-vis its major competitors, the US and Germany. In his speech, he stressed that Britain's continued world role depended upon it being a "pivotal" nation, acting as "a bridge between East and West, between the United States and the EU".

There is also nothing new in this conception of British foreign policy interests. A similar strategy of balancing between the US and Europe has been pursued since the Second World War. Blair insisted, however, that Britain would have to move closer to Europe in order to continue this strategy. The new patriotism had to avoid anti-European rhetoric, without losing sight of Britain's independent interests. However, this traditional balancing act cannot be maintained indefinitely under conditions of growing trade and even military disputes between the US and Europe.

Blair sought to defend his constitutional reforms as having strengthened the UK rather than weakened it. He described as a "quintessentially British" characteristic the fact that "we have always been willing to adapt our institutions to changing circumstances".

The government's devolving certain central government powers to new elected assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was necessary, said Blair. At the time of the last general election the Conservatives had been wiped out completely in Scotland and Wales, reflecting the deep sense of alienation of broad masses of the population. The only alternatives apparently on offer were "status quo or separatism", in the face of which Labour's devolution programme "offered a sensible modernisation of the partnership in the UK". He made an appeal for the continued unity of the UK based on the fact that in "defence, foreign policy, economic weight, we are better off and stronger together".

Blair's presentation of the merits of devolution was heavily one-sided. It has not led to a diminution of separatist agitation, but an increase. Increasingly, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru are overtaking Labour as the major party in Scotland and Wales. Under conditions where access to the world market is more

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important than traditional economic ties between Britain's constituent parts, sections of the bourgeoisie and upper middle class in Britain's regions believe their interests are best served by independence.

The most striking aspect of Blair's remarks was his attempt to address the ideological significance of nationalism for maintaining social cohesion.

Normally, the official pronouncements of the Labour government and its "Third Way" concentrate on denying that society is divided along class lines. Blair has repeatedly described the confrontation between capital and labour prior to his ascent to power as the result of a “tragic misunderstanding” that could have been avoided. Yet his recent speech contained a tacit admission that a major consideration in his government's calculations is the fear of such social conflicts re-emerging.

National identity "is not some remote and abstract issue," he warned. "Our failure in the post-war period to generate a clear sense of national purpose ... left space for a culture to develop in which sectional social and economic interests have fought to secure rights for themselves without a corresponding sense of their obligations to work for the wider public interest as well."

Blair warned against political complacency amongst Britain's elite who, fed by the stock market boom and cuts in taxation, may be deluded into thinking the nation state is an irrelevance. There were those who, encouraged by "ideologies of personal liberation and opportunities for self-fulfilment”, are turning “inwards to themselves rather than looking outward to the nation and the state".

Even his defence of Labour's constitutional changes was framed by citing the “tumultuous economic and social change” that had characterised the nineteenth century, and which had led to reform of "the suffrage not once but three times". This is a reference to the gradual extension of the vote to working class men, following revolutionary agitation by the Chartist movement.

Blair is no historian. His remarks were the product of New Labour's usual method of determining policy by establishing “focus groups” and “think tanks”. More than a year ago, the historian Linda Colley was invited to address a lecture in Downing Street on patriotism in which she explored similar themes. Colley is the author of *Britons*, in which she argues that the concept of "Britishness" is a modern creation, determined by the needs of Empire. British patriotism, which channelled "its inhabitants' aggression ... so regularly and so remorselessly into war and imperial expansion abroad", was a fundamental reason why Britain had managed to avoid civil war during the past 300 years (*Britons*, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 53).

In her Downing Street lecture, Colley said that the "old set-up" had not only been weakened by the loss of Empire and decline of Protestantism, but by "multi-culturalism" and the undermining of “traditional British institutions" over the last two decades. It was necessary to reinvent Britain's national identity, she said, based on a revamped concept of citizenship that convinces "all of the inhabitants of these islands that they are equal and valued citizens".

This did not mean making too radical changes, she cautioned—not even to the British monarchy. "Monarchs can serve as extremely useful and reassuring symbols of stability, especially in periods of massive cultural, economic and political flux like this one." Nor should this new national identity be apologetic about Britain's colonialist past. After all, "there is no sizeable state in the world which has not committed its fair share of genocide and oppression in the past ... we need a healthier, less apologetic view of our past, not least because one of the best ways to revitalise or invent a state is to pillage the past selectively."

Stripped of their liberal pretensions, both Colley and Blair's remarks testify to the essential function of nationalism. The supposed common interests of British citizens they espouse conceal the objective antagonisms between social classes. Blair has attempted to portray his government as being committed to an egalitarian society, and his new patriotism as being inclusive, anti-racist and humanitarian. He is serving up a thin ideological gruel, which cannot hope to disguise the gulf between rich and poor that is widening all the more as a result of Labour's pro-business policies.

A final observation should be made. At one point in his speech Blair asked rhetorically whether the breakdown of British national identity would lead to "more exclusive identities, rooted in nineteenth century conceptions of territory and blood".

His answer was to proclaim this approach as neither “practical” nor “meaningful”. “Blood alone does not define our national identity,” he said. He may believe his words to be in keeping with liberal traditions, praising Britain as a melting pot of races, cultures and traditions. But outside of the ranks of the extreme right, even to acknowledge “blood” as a factor in “Britishness” is a significant departure from traditional definitions of national identity. Even at the height of Empire, to be British meant to be loyal to the Queen. At least nominally, though by no means with respect to their actual treatment, the subject peoples of India and Africa were deemed British citizens. Successive post-war governments restricted this definition as part of their anti-immigrant legislation. It was Labour that introduced the so-called “patriality clause” in the 1970s, restricting British citizenship to those whose father or grandfather was born in Britain. Needless to say, the record of Blair's government on anti-immigrant measures is worse than its predecessors.

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