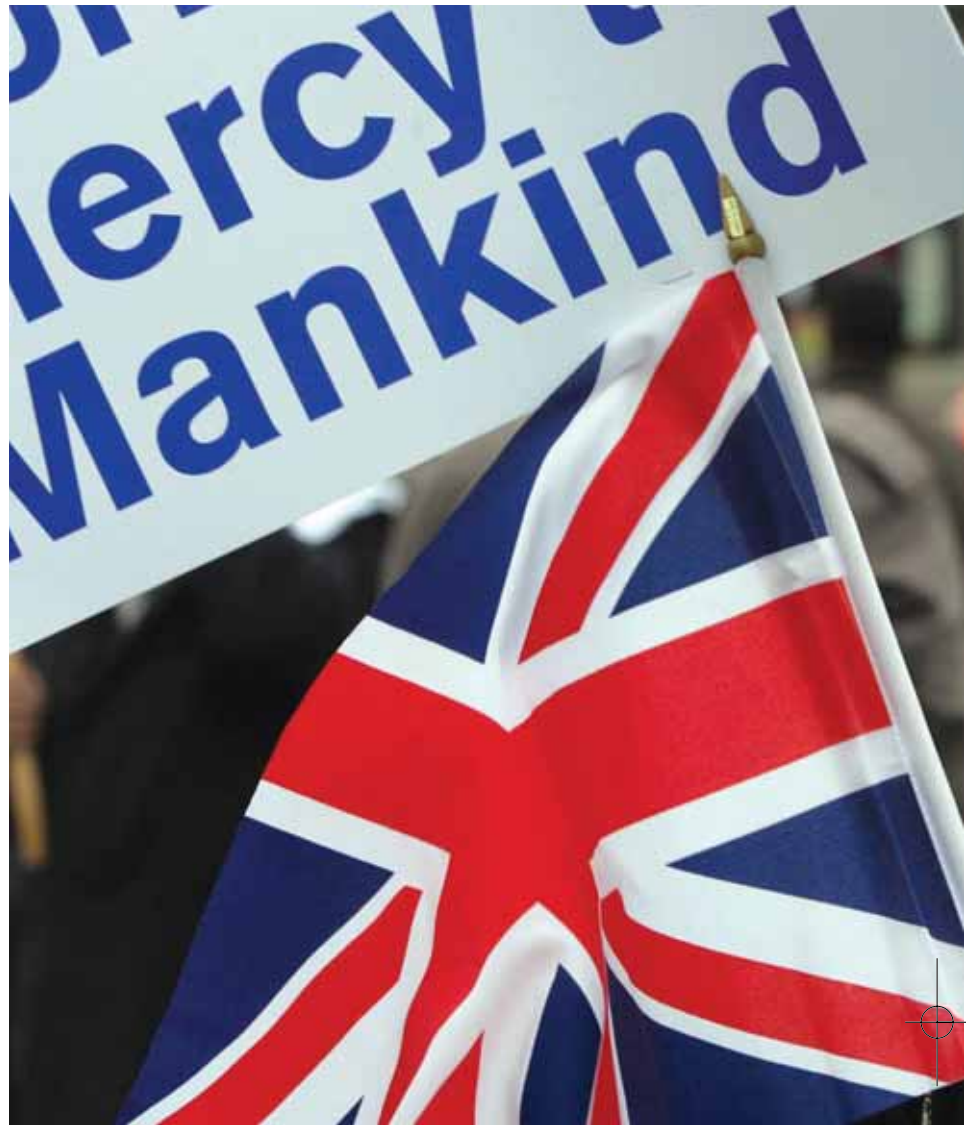


IDENTITY AND DEMOCRACY  
**JACK STRAW**

# THE WAY WE ARE



Society seems to be becoming more integrated at the same time as some people feel greater segregation. Growing integration increases the need for a national story of identity. This should express the core values of democracy: freedom, fairness, tolerance and plurality, for all to subscribe.

MATT WRITTLE/PA ARCHIVE/PA PHOTOS

**I** AM CLEARLY NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO THINKS THAT THE concept of identity is of increasing importance in understanding the challenges facing global politics. Amartya Sen recently published a book on the subject, while Francis Fukayama wrote about it with his customary thoughtfulness in Prospect magazine.

The challenges presented by identity politics are clear: disputes over the treatment of differences arising from gender, race, ethnicity, class and – most significantly of all today – religion.

The concept itself is more open to debate. Some components of our identity are, for instance, given to us – our race and gender – our physical make-up, right down to our fingerprints. Others are the subject of at least a degree of choice: religion, political affiliations, occupation, for some, nationality.

Yet even those elements that are ‘chosen’ are not necessarily the result of a free choice. Our identities are formed in conditions not altogether of our own choosing. The influence on identity of clan, tribe, peer group, families or place is huge.

## CROSSING BORDERS

The way in which the world is changing adds a further complication to this debate. Thanks to incredible advances in communications, dramatic transport cost reductions and the explosion of international trade, individuals now cross borders and intermingle with people from different cultures on a hitherto unknown scale.

Take Britain. We were never as homogenous as some would



now pretend. There were plenty of deep-seated divisions – not least religious, between Catholic, Anglican and non-conformist – which provoked conflict, discrimination and sometimes violence.

But it is undeniable that our society was more homogenous, say in the 1950s, than it is now. Today, we are a very heterogeneous society. Eight percent of our population – 4.3 million – is from families which have come to these shores, mainly from South Asia, the Caribbean and Africa, but increasingly from other areas too. It will not be long before some cities and towns in England have half of their population from such backgrounds. A quarter of the people living in greater London were born abroad.

In many ways, this rapid process of increasing heterogeneity has been and continues to be remarkably smooth. But these changes are having a profound effect on British society. A survey of electoral wards in England and Wales in 2005 found the number of racially mixed neighbourhoods had increased from 860 in 1991 to more than one thousand in 2001, and it will be at least 1,300 by 2011 – one in five throughout England.

## SOME SEGREGATE

However, the data also shows a contradictory picture – increasing integration for most people, in most areas; but increasing segregation for some in others.

Data published in the State of the English Cities report a year ago highlighted this divergence. It showed that segregation fell between 1991 and 2001 in 48 of the 56 towns and cities studied. But segregation had increased in eight areas, significantly

so in my own parliamentary constituency of Blackburn.

The trend towards greater segregation is most marked in some areas with large Asian, principally Muslim, populations.

This paradox of increasing integration on the one hand, and hardening segregation on the other, is not just evident in Britain. It is replicated in other countries, as had been highlighted by Vali Nasr, in his book *The Shia Revival*. He writes: 'It is as if our world is expanding and contracting at the same time. Diverse peoples embrace universal values and once insular communities engage in unprecedented levels of commerce and communication with the outside world. Yet at the same time primordial or near primordial ties of race, language, ethnicity and religion make themselves felt with dogged determination'.

## EXTREME VIEWS

So why have 'primordial' ties remained so powerful – and in some cases become more powerful?

One important part of the explanation is the impact of political change. The decline of ideology has increased the importance of culture as a source of identity. Half a century ago, discussions on the theme of identity would have been primarily about class consciousness and the competing ideologies of Marxist-Leninism and liberal democracy.

But today the most fundamental world divide is between liberal democracy and certain narrow misinterpretations of religious belief. The most frightening and fervent expression of that is a brand of terrorism which uses religion to justify its evil – a phenomenon where a single, all-consuming identity is wholly dominant.

Democracy is incompatible with any such identity. This, as we know, is a particular problem for certain fringe minority Muslim groups. These groups hold democracy as unacceptable. Instead, they favour a single unelected caliph who essentially dictates rules set by God. This brings them into direct confrontation with democratic states. Such groups also often argue that Muslims cannot be Muslims and British at the same time.

These people represent an extremely small fraction of the Muslim community, but they have shown an ability to amplify their significance to a degree far in excess of that warranted by their numbers. The problem for the vast majority of the Muslim community is that while they feel that they are unfairly associated with these extremists they may sometimes appear uncertain about how best to articulate their views in the face of such dogmatism.

At another extreme in the political spectrum there are also the fascists and the neo-fascists of the British National Party and the so-called England First party who present a warped, and entirely unrepresentative view of British society and identity.

## RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

How should all of us who reject these views, in other words the vast majority of people between these extremes, react to them?

There is no argument, approach or policy which of itself can protect society from the consequences of political extremism or religious fanaticism or both, but I believe that the more we can strengthen and make explicit the values – the rights and responsibilities – which come with being a citizen of Britain and the identity of being British, the more we can make democracy and identity compatible in a way which protects and celebrates all manner of those identities, religious and otherwise.

We also have to convince those who may feel detached from the national community that they are a part of it. We need to

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assure them that nationality does not mean assimilation; that it does not require individuals to give up distinctive cultural attributes, such as their religion.

Similarly, we have to reassure those who feel uneasy about the presence of people from foreign cultures and different ethnic backgrounds, that these new neighbours are not a threat to the identity and culture of the host community. The new communities enrich the nation, not undermine it.

## NATIONAL STORIES

National identity has often been described as an 'imagined community', a concept coined by Benedict Anderson, whereby a group of people hold in their minds a mental image of affinity with one another. Unlike a small group, most of the people that comprise a nation will never meet. Yet their mental image of communion is strong enough to manifest itself even in a willingness to die for the nation, as well as to help others in need. Any decline in the sense of national identity therefore has important consequences for society. That is why it is so crucial for us to establish a sense of identity and citizenship to which all can subscribe.

Here we can learn much from countries that have a more developed sense of citizenship, and what goes with it: notably from the United States, Canada, Australia, and those in western Europe who have had to develop the idea of citizenship to survive as nations, or indeed, simply to be nations.

The US is perhaps the best example, where two relatively recent wars, of independence and then the Civil war, have demanded clarity in the very concept of America and its people. Canada and Australia had to establish a clear sense of nationhood across vast continents, and in Canada's case has faced the challenge of Quebec separation too; whilst we are the only European nation – the only one – which has not within memory faced an existential crisis of dictatorship, occupation, defeat or the moral hazard of neutrality in a just war.

Indeed, a large part of what we describe as Britishness in our story traces straight back to our own civil war, its resolution in 1688 – and the Treaty of Union in 1707 – but we have not had a crisis of identity like that since, and it shows in the lack of precision about what we mean to be British.

Our history, and this exceptionalism, has meant that we have been unclear what British citizenship really means, and to what it relates. This was illustrated in a survey of British Social Attitudes in January, which found that respondents struggled to identify typically British values. And although a majority of people strongly approved of institutions such as the monarchy, they did not associate this with 'Britishness'.

Significantly, the Social Attitudes survey found that the strength of British national identity appears to be weakening, with more people describing themselves as Scottish, Welsh or English, than British.

To resolve this, we have to be clearer about what it means to be British, and, crucially, to be resolute in making the point that what comes with this is a set of values which have not just to be shared but accepted. Yes, there is room for multiple and different identities, but those have to be alongside an agreement, a contract, that none of these identities can take precedence over the core democratic values of freedom, fairness, tolerance and plurality that define what it means to be British. To be a British citizen, fully playing your part in British society, you must subscribe to that. It is the bargain and it is non-negotiable.

A 'British story' must be at the heart of this, as the story of the US is at the heart of its sense of citizenship.

This story must place more stress on the importance and centrality of democracy, how it developed and how it can serve as the means to allow different groups with often competing interests to live together in relative harmony. Crucially, we need

to get across the point that British nationality is not above all about blood and soil, but also about common civic values, and certain rights and responsibilities.

It is important that the national school curriculum teaches young people what is expected of them in terms of their rights and responsibilities, their civic duties and the way in which they interact with others. We should take this further, to develop an inclusive British story which reflects the past, takes a hard look at where we are now and creates a potent vision to make sense of our shared future.

You cannot, of course, transmit these ideas without stories. Other countries which do better than ours in defining their sense of citizenship – again, the US is the best example – do so by heroic stories of, for instance, how America came to be America. We must do the same, bringing out the freedom which lies at the heart of the story.

That means freedom through the narrative of the Magna Carta, the civil war, the Bill of Rights, through Adam Smith and the Scottish enlightenment, the fight for votes, for the emancipation of Catholics and non-conformists, of women and of the black community, the Second World War, the fight after that for rights for minority groups, the fight now against unbridled terror.

Of course, there is another, more complicated, side to this story of British freedom – that in seeking, in two senses, to secure our freedom through greater prosperity and greater security, we looked, and often were like oppressors, to the Irish and to many of the peoples of the British Empire. But the very creed of freedom which we preached abroad, if sometimes did not practice, helped ensure that our colonial episode collapsed under its own very British contradiction, and with less bloodshed than many other decolonisation struggles.

So if there is a sense of Britishness through our beliefs in freedom and democracy, is it possible for the world's multifarious identities to share an over-arching desire for common values which embraces and celebrates those identities but does not place them above all common values?

I believe it is, because the values I have talked about are not exclusively British or indeed western: they are common human values reflected in the charter of the United Nations. Their application has evolved and continues to do so.

## COLLECTIVE WILL

The founders of the civic republican tradition, with its roots in ancient Greece and later in Rome, aimed to enshrine the idea that political decision-making should reflect and embody the collective will of the people. What is uniquely British is the process by which these principles and ideals were gradually applied here. Other nations have employed similar principles, but the establishment of democracy was not, and is not, the same everywhere.

What this shows is the concepts which underpin democracy have developed at a different pace, at different times and in different ways. In the course of the twentieth Century, democracy triumphed, first in the outcome of the Second World War, and subsequently in the Cold War. The values inherent in democracy were then applied even more widely: in Europe, for instance, what was once a very small club of democratic states became by the end of the century a much larger club united through common values.

At the start of the twenty-first century, however, democracy faces the challenges described. All the more important then that in the face of this challenge, those of us who subscribe to democratic values assert ever more stridently our belief in them, explaining why they are the values which provide a global bond between people while respecting their different identities.

