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British Political Parties and National Identity: a Changing Discourse 1997-2010. Pauline Schnapper. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2011. Hardcover, 175 pages. ISBN-10: 1-4438-2727-4. $52.99.

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In urging Scots to reject independence in the referendum planned by the nationalist government in Edinburgh, British Prime Minister David Cameron has repeatedly professed his love for the United Kingdom. But love for the UK is a curious patriotism: the UK is not a nation, it is a state, and it is very uncommon for anyone to declare their love for a state. Over the past three centuries, Britishness has provided that state with a cohesive national identity that has served as the object of its citizens' loyalty and affection. But, since WWII, Britishness has been increasingly tested as an identity, and it is no longer certain that it is sufficient to sustain the UK as a state in the face of current internal and external challenges. The responses of the major UK-wide parties to those challenges are the subject of this informative study by Pauline Schnapper, a professor of British Studies at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris 3. Schnapper demonstrates that the nature of British national identity is now an inescapable issue in UK politics, forcing us to reconsider the traditional left/right party political spectrum in favour of a new and more complex configuration.

Schnapper begins with a minimalist summary of the historical construction of British identity. In *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992), historian Linda Colley challenged the influential internal colonialist analysis according to which Britishness is essentially the coercive imposition of Englishness upon the non-English peoples of the British Isles, who must either accept it or resist it.[1] Colley countered that a genuinely British national identity emerged between the 1707 union of the English and Scottish parliaments and Queen Victoria's 1837 coronation. This British national identity took on a life of its own, but neither supplanted nor contradicted the Isles' older national and regional identities.

Drawing on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), Colley interpreted the creation of Britishness as an imaginative process consisting of four key elements: an anti-Catholicism that promoted unity between Anglicans and the various Protestant sects; a xenophobic denigration of France both as a Catholic power and as Britain's chief geo-strategic competitor; the imperial expansion made possible by the securing of England's northern flank through the union with Scotland; and the industrial revolution that progressively integrated the

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British Isles' nations and regions into a single British national economy. These historically unifying factors have all since eroded, and British identity has become confused and contested under the impact of four destabilizing challenges identified by Schnapper: nationalism in the so-called "Celtic Fringe," immigration and multiculturalism, European integration, and economic globalization.

The erosion of unity began with secularization and the replacement of religion by ideology as the principal fault line in British politics everywhere except Northern Ireland, which is regarded as a special case and therefore not included in Schnapper's study. But the gradual loss of empire after WWII removed a pillar of unity every bit as fundamental as religion. To explain the profound consequences of imperial decline for the British national psyche, Schnapper directs her readers to the work of historian David Marquand. For Marquand, the post-1707 British self-perception was "Whig imperialist," the Whig element represented by sustained balance and peaceful adaptation in domestic politics, and the imperialist element consisting of a pride in the providential and benign nature of Britain's rise to global pre-eminence. "Empire," Marquand writes, "was not an optional extra for the British, in the way that republicanism was an optional extra for the French. It was their vocation, their reason for being British as opposed to English, Scots, or Welsh."[2]

For students of nationalism, the notion of the stateless nation is now a very familiar one. But Marquand's conclusion is that, in the absence of empire, the UK has become a nationless state, and the official appellation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been reduced to "bureaucratic gobbledygook, with about as much resonance as a tax form" — a soulless entity that the Scottish nationalist writer Tom Nain has termed "Ukania".[3]

Schnapper shows that as the UK lost that crucially important romantic element of Britishness, the long-established Welsh and Scottish national identities took on renewed significance. Efforts to retain and reassert those identities predate the demise of empire, but it was not until the mid-1960s that the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) achieved their seminal by-election breakthroughs. The position of Wales and Scotland within the UK has been a permanent feature of political debate ever since.

It was inevitable that the destabilization of British identity would also destabilize the political parties that had previously taken that identity as given. Schnapper is right to say that the politics of national identity have no obvious place on the left-right political spectrum; consequently, the rise of sub-state nationalism as a political fact has created complex and shifting new alignments and divisions within and between parties.

First and hardest hit was Labour, the predominant party in Wales and Scotland, and the UK governing party at the time of the nationalist breakthroughs. It responded with the 1967 Welsh Language Act as well as a Royal Commission on the Constitution that would ultimately reject both independence and federalism in favour of devolved institutions of self-government for the UK's constituent nations. As Labour's slim October 1974 general election majority dwindled to zero, SNP and Plaid Cymru Members of Parliaments were able to press the government for referenda on devolution, despite the issue's divisiveness within the Labour Party.

Labour's early twentieth-century founders had been sympathetic to Welsh and Scottish home rule. But the economic crises of the inter-war period, and participation in the WWII coalition, reorientated Labour away from more pluralist forms of socialism and towards a centralized economic planning that contradicted political decentralization. Even in the post-WWII Keynesian consensus years, Labour retained its ambitions to extend central planning and, in the wake of its 1979 electoral defeat, the party moved leftwards with the statist Alternative Economic Strategy that was hard to reconcile with devolution. Labour readopted devolution towards the end of the 1980s, largely in response to growing Scottish discontent with Conservative rule from London. But it was the post-social democratic New Labour government of Tony Blair that finally introduced a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly.

The Conservative Party's position on Welsh and Scottish self-government has also been characterized by an inconsistent response to events. In 1968, party leader and future Prime Minister Edward Heath issued the Declaration of Perth, in which he supported the principle of Scottish devolution. His successor, Margaret Thatcher, initially supported devolution but, as Prime Minister, proved to be as much of a political centralizer as she was an economic libertarian.

The de-industrializing effects of the Thatcher government's deflationary economic policies were particularly severe in Scotland and Wales, where the Conservatives increasingly came to be seen as a party of English interests. This perception was further deepened by the piloting in Scotland of the community charge—a deeply unpopular form of local government taxation. The result was the collapse of Conservative support in Scotland (where no Conservative MPs were returned in 1997) and a rise in support for Scottish home rule. In opposition, the Conservatives campaigned against devolution in the 1999 Welsh and Scottish referenda, but pledged to accept the eventual Yes vote.

The gyrations that characterize the Labour and Conservative responses to Welsh and Scottish demands for self-government are absent from the track record of the Liberal Democrats. The party is a product of a 1988 merger between the long-established Liberal Party and the Labour-breakaway Social Democratic Party, and parts of Wales and Scotland are important to its electoral base. Informed by the nineteenth-century Gladstonian home rule tradition, it has consistently argued for political and administrative decentralization that better recognizes both national and regional identities within the UK, though there have been internal disagreements on questions of devolution versus federalism. Clearly, the Liberal Democrats are the most radical of the three major parties on questions of constitutional reform. Equally clearly, they are ultimately a Unionist party that strongly opposes independence for Scotland or Wales.

When confronted with resurgent Welsh and Scottish national identities, the political parties can respond by drawing on a menu of constitutional changes. However**,** immigration and the resulting creation of a multicultural society have produced a situation less amenable to institutional solutions. Schnapper distinguishes between three meanings of the term "multiculturalism": a description of social reality, an ideology according to which cultural diversity is inherently positive, and a public policy designed to translate the ideology into practice. Over the course of the past half-century, multiculturalism has unarguably become Britain's social reality. However**,** its claimed benefits and drawbacks have been hotly disputed and multiculturalism as policy has become the focus of that dispute to such an extent that

Schnapper believes Britain has now reached a multicultural crisis in which the societal position of British Muslims is only the most concentrated aspect.

A British public philosophy of immigration was first articulated in the mid-1960s by Roy Jenkins, then Labour Home Secretary. Jenkins defended multiculturalism and insisted that integration was about diversity and mutual tolerance, rather than assimilation. Both this philosophy and the attendant policies would undergo substantial revision in the Thatcher years, with the introduction of stronger immigration controls based on claims that the British feared being "swamped" by immigrants. One of Thatcher's principal lieutenants, Norman Tebbitt, complained that Britain's black and Asian communities were failing the "cricket test," meaning that they cheered the cricket teams of their own, or their families', countries of origin in matches against England.

There was always a contradiction between Thatcherism's neoliberal advocacy of the free movement of goods and services and its objection to the free movement of people. Initially, Tony Blair's New Labour sought to resolve that contradiction. Between its election in 1997 and its post-2001 immersion in Washington's "War on Terror," New Labour stressed the specifically economic benefits of immigration, but it also revived official support for multiculturalism.

In a report published by the independent Runnymeade Trust in 2000, the political theorist Bikhu Parekh generally affirmed the renewed commitment to multiculturalism. But the report went further in arguing that, for ethnic minority communities, the very notion of Britishness itself evoked unwelcome memories of empire. Looking to the Canadian example, Parekh argued that this problem could only be rectified with an official declaration of Britain's status as a multicultural society.

Since then, as Schnapper shows with impressive concision, Britain's debate over diversity has itself diversified. Left-wing social commentator Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has argued that the celebration and promotion of diversity have neglected the poorer members of ethnic minority communities and alienated English whites, "who feel that everybody's culture is celebrated but their own, and that special treatment and disproportionate attention is being given to small minorities, whether black, Asian, Scottish or Welsh."[4] Journalist David Goodhart has warned that multiculturalism could undermine support for the welfare state. And Trevor Phillips, a leading figure in Britain's black community, and Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has expressed his fear that "the integrationist baby" is being thrown out with "the assimilationist bathwater."[5] Against the background of these and similar views, New Labour introduced citizenship and language tests designed to better integrate new immigrants. The hardening of the government's position on immigration was signalled when Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, promised "British jobs for British workers." The context for Brown's jobs remarks was the unpopularity of recent Labour migration from Eastern European member states of the European Union (EU), which fused immigration concerns with another perceived threat to British identity—European integration. While the Liberal Democrats have been consistently pro-European, Europe has been a wedge issue both within and between the Conservative and Labour parties.

It was Edward Heath's Conservative government that took Britain into the then-EEC in

1973, but the party's right wing has since then aggressively pursued the theme that the principle of pooled European sovereignty is a threat to British independence. In her 1988 Bruges speech, Prime Minister Thatcher articulated a kind of British Gaullism—a vision of Europe limited to a free trade association between sovereign states. Her successor, John Major, signed the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that created the EU and paved the way for the Euro, but, in doing so, he opened up deep fissures within the Conservative ranks.

Labour has exhibited comparable splits. The party's social democratic wing has always included an important pro-European contingent, while the left has often seen the economic liberalism of the European founding treaties as an impediment to its economic agenda. The Wilson government's 1975 referendum exposed the internal divisions of both Labour and the Conservatives, but affirmed Britain’s EEC membership. As Labour moved left in opposition after 1979, it adopted withdrawal from Europe as official policy. But over the course of the 1980s, the Conservatives dismantled tripartite economic structures and froze trade unions out of national economic decision-making. As a result, the unions sought in Brussels the influence they had lost in London, and took the lead in converting Labour to a pro-European stance.

Britain's tortuous relationship to Europe was expressed in the bafflingly archaic language of arch-modernizer Tony Blair. He accepted that, for continental European states, the reasons for post-war integration were compelling. But, he insisted, "[f]or Britain, the victor in WWII, the main ally of the United States, a proud and independent-minded island race (though with much European blood flowing in our veins) the reasons were there, but somehow always less than absolutely compelling."[6]

Schnapper renders this with the objectivity that characterizes the whole book. But it would have been legitimate to editorialize that this is delusional nonsense: the British are not a race; Britain was not the victor of WWII but a vital part of a victorious coalition; being the most reliable ally of the U.S. is not the same as being the most important; and it is not even clear that Britain remains an island in the era of globalization—the final challenge to British identity identified by Schnapper.

While other countries have construed world trade liberalization as an actual or potential threat to national identity, Schnapper convincingly argues that Britain has been able to embrace it because imperial free trade was a key constituent element in the initial construction of British identity. This is why Britain has been as positive about European free trade as it has been negative about European political integration. The success of Britain's City-based financial services industries in the era of globalization has reaffirmed this connection between economic openness and British identity—in the southeast of England, that is. But in Scotland, Wales, and the north of England, identities have been centred on manufacturing, which has gone into sharp decline even as the financial sector has soared. That, ultimately, is the threat that globalization poses to British national identity.

British Political Parties and National Identity is an excellent entry point for anyone wanting to understand the ways in which "British" has become a problematic term. Schnapper's efforts to reconfigure British parties on the basis of the intersecting cleavages of center/periphery, sovereignty/interdependence, and unity/diversity are insightful. However, by omitting the

left/right cleavage, she may have exaggerated the (undeniably very considerable) ideological convergence between the three major parties on economic issues. Regrettably, the book does not consider in any detail the complex and evolving internal politics of the nationalist parties, even though the SNP has been in power in Scotland since 2007, and Plaid Cymru was in coalition with Labour from 2007-11 under the *Cymru'n Un* (One Wales) agreement. This explains the all-too-ready use of the imprecise and misleading term "Celtic Fringe," which fails to capture the important differences in character between Scottish and Welsh nationalism, for example**.**

It is also likely that Schnapper has understated the problems that the destabilization of Britishness poses for the UK as a state. She quotes a leading constitutional authority, the late Sir Bernard Crick, as saying that "British" is properly thought of as "a political and legal concept best applied to the institutions of the United Kingdom state, to common citizenship and common political arrangements. It is not a cultural term, nor does it correspond to any real sense of the nation."[7] But for nearly three centuries, Britishness has provided the United Kingdom with a very real sense of nationhood, and it is precisely the loss of that Britishness that is precipitating the current crisis of the UK state.

This appears to have been recognized at the highest levels. As Prime Minister, Gordon Brown tried to articulate distinctively British values but, as Schnapper comments, failed to get beyond language that could be claimed by any liberal democracy. And, since Schnapper's book went to press, Prime Minister Cameron has sought to revive those factors identified by Linda Colley as the components of British national identity: he engineered a high-profile, but nonetheless largely technical, disagreement with the UK's European partners over the financial stability pact; on the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, he delivered a speech asserting the importance of Christianity to British identity; he launched his party's defence of the Union against the Scottish independence campaign; and he stressed the fact that the UK played a leading part in the Libyan intervention. Here, the EU assumes the role once played by France; Christianity is asserted over the religious pluralism created by multiculturalism, just as Protestantism was once asserted over "alien" Catholicism; the Union is defended against sub-state nationalism; and the decline of British power is once again masked by military adventurism. Whether such measures can arrest, or even retard, the erosion of British identity remains to be seen. The referendum on Scottish independence will be the next stress test for Britishness but, whatever the outcome may be, it will not be the last.

Endnotes

1. See Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1999.
2. David Marquand, 'After Whig imperialism: can there be a new British identity?', in *New Community*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p.188.
3. Ibid. See Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*, updated 2nd edition, Verso, London, 2011.
4. Quoted p. 84.
5. Quoted p. 101.
6. Quoted, p. 50.
7. Quoted, p. 3.