THE OPENING ESSAY · PART II OF III

A Living Nation

What Britain has inherited and what makes it a nation.

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A new settlement cannot be assembled from a list of policies. It needs an account of what it is for.

The settlement now failing Britain treated it as an economy and a territory administered by a state, and so it never answered the questions that matter most to a nation: who we are, what we have inherited and what we owe to those who come after us. Any replacement has to begin with those questions.

That means describing the inheritance and defining the nation that carried it.

I. The Inheritance

Britain is not an economy or a collection of institutions, and nor is it a proposition nation made up of whoever happens to hold citizenship at a given moment. It is the political expression of historic peoples, principally the English, Scots and Welsh, whose cultures and institutions predate the modern state and whose union created it.

Britain was an inheritance before it was an administration, and it is an unusually rich one.

Anglo, Anglo-Celtic and British

This essay uses Anglo to describe a civilisation that took shape in England, was shared and developed across Britain and was then carried by settlement into the wider English speaking world. Its language, its common law and its parliamentary government began in England, but the civilisation was never only English.

The Scots gave it much of its philosophy, its economics and its engineering. The Scottish Enlightenment of Hume and Smith shaped how the modern world thinks about markets, morals and society, while Scottish engineers such as Watt helped to power the industrial age. The Welsh gave it a radical tradition of self-improvement and a language older than English itself.

Anglo-Celtic is therefore the more accurate description of the British inheritance, because it names a common civilisation formed by distinct peoples who each kept their own character within it.

A common public culture does not mean uniformity across England, Scotland and Wales. It means a shared civilisation within which these national traditions sit and which each of them helped to build. Carried abroad, the same civilisation became the Anglosphere. For shorthand here, we will often refer to it as Anglo.

What the inheritance contained

That civilisation combined Christianity, common law, individual liberty, private property, dispersed authority, voluntary association, scientific inquiry, commercial enterprise and a powerful sense of common national purpose.

Its distinctive achievement lay in holding these together. Scepticism towards concentrated power coexisted with an extraordinary capacity for collective action, fierce individualism with a strong sense of social obligation and respect for tradition with a willingness to experiment.

Christianity was fundamental to that development. It shaped ideas of individual moral worth, conscience, duty and charity, it formed institutions and communities and it permeated the language, literature, education, architecture and law of the country.

From this soil grew institutions capable of turning ingenuity into progress on a scale no nation had achieved before. Britain became the world's first industrial economy, developed transformative technologies and created forms of parliamentary government, common-law liberty and commercial organisation that spread far beyond these islands. The improvements in life expectancy and prosperity that define the modern world owe much to the scientific, industrial and institutional flourishing that took place here.

At its height this small island built the largest empire in history and exercised influence wildly disproportionate to its population. Left and right repudiate and romanticise that history in equal measure, but what matters for this argument is the scale of ambition, capability and confidence it required.

Much of the inheritance passed into the wider Anglosphere, in an extraordinary and unusual act of reproducing its civilisation in entire continents. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and above all the United States, mirror the institutional and cultural characteristics of this small island.

This was a civilisation that explored, discovered, invented, built, traded, argued, adapted and transformed itself.

Its inheritance is not merely what it built, but it is the impulse to build.

II. What Is a Nation?

Every argument about identity and belonging eventually returns to the same question. What is a nation?

For decades Britain has tried to avoid answering it. Multiculturalism offered a substitute in which many communities would live side by side, held together by shared law and public services but with no expectation that they would become one people. That substitute has not held, but the two other answers that remain, capture something, whilst remaining insufficient on their own.

Ancestry alone

The first answer treats the nation as a matter of ancestry alone. If that were true, assimilation would be impossible and the descendants of newcomers could never become part of the nation. That is not how this nation was built, and it is not how any nation was built.

Britain has absorbed newcomers throughout its history. The Huguenots who fled France in the late seventeenth century settled in Spitalfields and elsewhere, where they worshipped in their own churches and kept their own language. Within a few generations their descendants had married into English families and joined English parishes, and most of the French churches had closed.

Their names remain. Their separateness does not.

Citizenship alone

The second answer treats the nation as a community of citizens united by common institutions, laws and values, in which anyone who accepts them is equally British.

Its attraction is obvious. It preserves equality before the law, offers newcomers a route in and avoids reducing nationality to genetics. A civic nationalist can agree that Britain's institutions emerged from a historic people while arguing that every present citizen holds equal membership of the polity those people created.

On civic standing this maybe right. But citizenship is an account of legal standing. It is not an account of how a nation continues.

A nation continues not because its members hold the same passport but because habits, loyalties, assumptions and forms of trust pass from one generation to the next and from established residents to newcomers. The state cannot confer those things. They are reproduced through families, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, churches, clubs and marriages, which is why legal membership can be granted in a day while the social membership on which a nation depends takes generations.

Taken to its conclusion, the civic answer implies that the population could change without limit while Britain remained the same, provided each new population affirmed the correct propositions, but institutions do not float above populations in that way. Parliament, the common law, the monarchy, the English language, the established Church and the Union did not precede the nation but emerged from it, and they still depend on the people who sustain them.

A living nation

A historic people is neither a closed biological category nor an abstraction separable from ancestry. It is a population reproduced across generations through both descent and culture and capable of absorbing newcomers through participation, marriage and assimilation.

A living nation therefore sits between the two answers. It can incorporate newcomers without becoming infinitely substitutable, and it has a legitimate interest in its own continuity.

The nation cannot be reduced to a market, to ancestry or to citizenship. It is an intergenerational community: a people with a shared inheritance, capable of incorporating outsiders and entitled to continue.

The alternative to post-national liberalism is neither a thin civic nationalism in which everyone obeys the same laws while keeping entirely separate identities, nor an ethnic state in which ancestry determines civic status. It is the continuation of a living national civilisation.

It is only by embracing an obligation between generations that we can build a political settlement that is concerned with the future rather than the short term present.