

The future of Britishness

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*Full text of **Gordon Brown's** keynote speech to the Fabian Future of Britishness conference, arguing that British values demand a new constitutional settlement and a renewed civic patriotism. (14th January 2006).*

- **Fabian Britishness conference:** : [Full reports and reaction](#)
- Should we do more to define a positive sense of Britishness? Send your views to debate@fabian-society.org.uk.

When we take time to stand back and reflect, it becomes clear that to address almost every one of the major challenges facing our country – our relationships with Europe, America and the rest of the world; how we equip ourselves for globalisation; the future direction of constitutional change; a modern view of citizenship; the future of local government, ideas of localism; and, of course, our community relations and multiculturalism and, since July 7th, the balance between diversity and integration; even the shape of our public services – you must have a clear view of what being British means, what you value about being British and what gives us purpose as a nation.

Being clear what Britishness means in a post-imperial world is essential if we are to forge the best relationships with the developing world and in particular with Africa.

But take Europe also: there is no doubt that in the years after 1945, faced with relative economic decline as well as the end of empire, Britain lost confidence in itself and its role in the world and became so unsure about what a confident post-imperial Britain could be that too many people defined the choice in Europe as either total absorption or splendid isolation. And forgot that just as you could stand for Britain while being part of NATO, you can stand for Britain and advance British national interests as part of the European Union.

Let me also suggest that it is because that loss of confidence led too many to retreat into the idea of Britain, Britain as little more than institutions that never changed – so for decades, for fear of losing our British identity, Britain did not face up to some of the great constitutional questions, whether it be the second chamber, the relationship of the legislative to the executive or the future of local government.

Take also the unity of the United Kingdom and its component parts. While we have always been a country of different nations and thus of plural identities – a Welshman can be Welsh and British, just as a Cornishman or woman is Cornish, English and British – and may be Muslim, Pakistani or Afro-Caribbean, Cornish, English and British – there is always a risk that, when people are insecure, they retreat into more exclusive identities rooted in 19th century conceptions of blood, race and territory – when instead, we the British people should be able to gain great strength from celebrating a British identity which is bigger than the sum of its parts and a union that is strong because of the values we share and because of the way these values are expressed through our history and our institutions.

And take the most recent illustration of what challenges us to be more explicit about Britishness: the debate about asylum and immigration and about

multiculturalism and inclusion, issues that are particularly potent because in a fast changing world people who are insecure need to be rooted. Here the question is essentially whether our national identity is defined by values we share in common or just by race and ethnicity – a definition that would leave our country at risk of relapsing into a wrongheaded 'cricket test' of loyalty.

Equally, while the British response to the events of July 7th was magnificent, we have to face uncomfortable facts that there were British citizens, British born, apparently integrated into our communities, who were prepared to maim and kill fellow British citizens, irrespective of their religion – and this must lead us to ask how successful we have been in balancing the need for diversity with the obvious requirements of integration in our society.

But I would argue that if we are clear about what underlies our Britishness and if we are clear that shared values – not colour, nor unchanging and unchangeable institutions – define what it means to be British in the modern world, we can be far more ambitious in defining for our time the responsibilities of citizenship; far more ambitious in forging a new and contemporary settlement of the relationship between state, community and individual; and it is also easier too to address difficult issues that sometimes come under the heading 'multiculturalism' – essentially how diverse cultures, which inevitably contain differences, can find the essential common purpose without which no society can flourish.

So Britishness is not just an academic debate – something just for the historians, just for the commentators, just for the so-called chattering classes. Indeed in a recent poll, as many as half of British people said they were worried that if we do not promote Britishness we run a real risk of having a divided society.

And if we look to the future I want to argue that our success as Great Britain, our ability to meet and master not just the challenges of a global economy, but also the international, demographic, constitutional and social challenges ahead, and even the security challenges, requires us to rediscover and build from our history and apply in our time the shared values that bind us together and give us common purpose.

I believe most strongly that globalisation is made for a Britain, that is stable, outward looking, committed to scientific progress and the value of education. And that by taking the right long term decisions Britain can stand alongside China, India and America as one of the great success stories of the next global era.

But it is also obvious to me that the nations that will meet and master global change best are not just those whose governments make the right long term decisions on stability, science, trade and education, but whose people come together and, sharing a common view of challenges and what needs to be done, forge a unified and shared sense of purpose about the long term sacrifices they are prepared to make and the priorities they think important for national success.

And just as in war time a sense of common patriotic purpose inspired people to do what is necessary, so in peace time a strong modern sense of patriotism and patriotic purpose which binds people together can motivate and inspire.

And this British patriotism is, in my view, founded not on ethnicity nor race, not just on institutions we share and respect, but on enduring ideals which shape our view of ourselves and our communities – values which in turn influence the way our institutions evolve.

Yet as Jonathan Freedland has written in his 'Bring Home the Revolution', Britain is almost unique in that, unlike America and many other countries, we have no constitutional statement or declaration enshrining our objectives as a country; no mission statement defining purpose; and no explicitly stated vision of our future.

So I will suggest to you today that it is to our benefit to be more explicit about what we stand for and what are our objectives and that we will meet and master all challenges best by finding shared purpose as a country in our enduring British ideals that I would summarise as – in addition to our qualities of creativity, inventiveness, enterprise and our internationalism, our central beliefs are a commitment to – liberty for all, responsibility by all and fairness to all.

And I believe that out of a debate, hopefully leading to a broad consensus about what Britishness means, flows a rich agenda for change: a new constitutional settlement, an explicit definition of citizenship, a renewal of civic society, a rebuilding of our local government and a better balance between diversity and integration.

And around national symbols, that also unite the whole country, an inclusive Britishness where, as a result of our commitment to liberty for all, responsibility by all and fairness to all, we make it possible for not just some, but all, people to realise their potential to the full.

So what do we mean when we talk about Britishness?

Remember when we were young, we wrote out our addresses: our town, our county, our country, our continent, the world.

Like James Joyce jokingly at the start of 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man': Stephen Dedalus, Class of elements, Clongowes Wood College, Sallins, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe.

I will say something more about the importance to identity of neighbourhoods, towns, villages and communities and about our global responsibilities. But, while a few years ago only less than half – 46 per cent – identified closely with being British, today national identity has become far more important: it is not 46 per cent but 65 per cent – two thirds – who now identify Britishness as important. And recent surveys show that British people feel more patriotic about their country than almost any other European country.

So what is it to be British?

What has emerged from the long tidal flows of British history – from the 2,000 years of successive waves of invasion, immigration, assimilation and trading partnerships; from the uniquely rich, open and outward looking culture – is a distinctive set of values which influence British institutions.

Even before America made it its own, I think Britain can lay claim to the idea of liberty. Out of the necessity of finding a way to live together in a multinational state came the practice of toleration and then the pursuit of liberty.

Voltaire said that Britain gave to the world the idea of liberty. In the seventeenth century, Milton in 'Paradise Lost' put it as "if not equal all, yet all equally free." Think of Wordsworth's poetry about the "flood of British freedom"; then Hazlitt's belief that we have and can have "no privilege or advantage over other nations

but liberty"; right through to Orwell's focus on justice, liberty and decency defining Britain. We can get a Parliament from anywhere, said Henry Grattan, we can only get liberty from England.

So there is, as I have argued, a golden thread which runs through British history – that runs from that long ago day in Runnymede in 1215; on to the Bill of Rights in 1689 where Britain became the first country to successfully assert the power of Parliament over the King; to not just one, but four great Reform Acts in less than a hundred years – of the individual standing firm against tyranny and then – an even more generous, expansive view of liberty – the idea of government accountable to the people, evolving into the exciting idea of empowering citizens to control their own lives.

Just as it was in the name of liberty that in the 1800s Britain led the world in abolishing the slave trade – something we celebrate in 2007 – so too in the 1940s in the name of liberty Britain stood firm against fascism, which is why I would oppose those who say we should do less to teach that period of our history in our schools.

But woven also into that golden thread of liberty are countless strands of common, continuing endeavour in our villages, towns and cities – the efforts and popular achievements of ordinary men and women, with one sentiment in common – a strong sense of duty and responsibility: men and women who did not allow liberty to descend into a selfish individualism or into a crude libertarianism; men and women who, as is the essence of the labour movement, chose solidarity in preference to selfishness; thus creating out of the idea of duty and responsibility the Britain of civic responsibility, civic society and the public realm.

And so the Britain we admire of thousands of voluntary associations; the Britain of mutual societies, craft unions, insurance and friendly societies and cooperatives; the Britain of churches and faith groups; the Britain of municipal provision from libraries to parks; and the Britain of public service. Mutuality, cooperation, civic associations and social responsibility and a strong civic society – all concepts that after a moment's thought we see clearly have always owed most to progressive opinion in British life and thought. The British way always – as Jonathan Sachs has suggested – more than self interested individualism – at the core of British history, the very ideas of 'active citizenship', 'good neighbour', civic pride and the public realm.

Which is why two thirds of people are adamant that being British carries with it responsibilities for them as citizens as well as rights.

But the 20th century has given special place also to the idea that in a democracy where people have both political social and economic rights and responsibilities, liberty and responsibility can only fully come alive if there is a Britain not just of liberty for all, and responsibility from all, but fairness to all.

Of course the appeal to fairness runs through British history, from early opposition to the first poll tax in 1381 to the second; fairness the theme from the civil war debates – where Raineborough asserted that "the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he"; to the 1940s when Orwell talked of a Britain known to the world for its 'decency'.

Indeed a 2005 YouGov survey showed that as many as 90 per cent of British people thought that fairness and fair play were very important or fairly important in defining Britishness.

And of course this was the whole battle of 20th century politics – whether fairness would be formal equality before the law or something much more, a richer equality of opportunity.

You only need look at the slogan which dominated Live Aid 2005 to see how, even in the years from 1985 to 2005, fairness had moved to become the central idea – the slogan in 2005 was 'from charity to justice': not just donations for hand-outs, but, by making things happen, forcing governments to deliver fairness.

Take the NHS – like the monarchy, the army, the BBC – one of the great British institutions – what 90 per cent of British people think portrays a positive symbol of the real Britain – founded on the core value of fairness that all should have access to health care founded on need, not ability to pay.

A moment's consideration of the importance of the NHS would tell us that you don't need to counterpose civic society to government and assume that one can only flourish at the expense of the other or vice versa. Britain does best when we have both a strong civic society and a government committed to empowering people, acting on the principle of fairness.

And according to one survey, more than 70 per cent of British people pride ourselves in all three qualities - our tolerance, responsibility and fairness together.

So in a modern progressive view of Britishness, as I set out in a speech a few weeks ago, liberty does not retreat into self-interested individualism, but leads to ideas of empowerment; responsibility does not retreat into a form of paternalism, but is indeed a commitment to the strongest possible civic society; and fairness is not simply a formal equality before the law, but is in fact a modern belief in an empowering equality of opportunity for all.

So in my view, the surest foundation upon which we can advance economically, socially and culturally in this century will be to apply to the challenges that we face, the values of liberty, responsibility and fairness – shared civic values which are not only the ties that bind us, but also give us patriotic purpose as a nation and sense of direction and destiny.

And so in this vision of a Britain of liberty for all, responsibility from all and fairness to all we move a long way from the old left's embarrassed avoidance of an explicit patriotism.

Orwell correctly ridiculed the old left view for thinking that patriotism could be defined only from the right: as reactionary; patriotism as a defence of unchanging institutions that would never modernise; patriotism as a defence of deference and hierarchy; and patriotism as, in reality, the dislike of foreigners and self interested individualism.

We now see that when the old left recoiled from patriotism they failed to understand that the values on which Britishness is based – liberty to all,

responsibility by all, fairness for all – owe more to progressive ideas than to right wing ones.

But more than that, these core values of what it is to be British are the key to the next stage of our progress as a people: values that are capable of uniting us and inspiring us as we meet and master the challenges of the future.

So we in our party should feel pride in a British patriotism and patriotic purpose founded on liberty for all, responsibility by all, and fairness to all. And, as we address global challenges, the modern application of these great enduring ideas that British people hold dear offers us a rich agenda for change, reform and modernisation true to these values.

- **Speech continues:** [Gordon Brown on Britishness \(part two\)](#)
- **Gordon Brown** was speaking at the Fabian New Year Conference 2006 - Who do we want to be? The future of Britishness - held at Imperial College, London on Saturday 14th January 2006.

More on Britishness

Gordon Brown on Britishness (part two)

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Gordon Brown's speech to the Fabian Future of Britishness conference sets out how a new British civic patriotism gives rise to a "rich agenda for change and reform" - including a new constitutional settlement and social and economic integration.

- [Gordon Brown on Britishness \(part one\)](#)
- **Fabian Britishness conference:** [Full reports and reaction](#)
- What practical reforms would strengthen Britishness? Send your views to debate@fabian-society.org.uk.

First, start with the constitution and test the current condition of Britain against our principles of liberty for all, responsibility by all and fairness to all.

And just as each generation needs to renew the settlement between individual, community and state, so too we should recognise that we do not today meet our ideal of liberty for all if we were to allow power to become over-centralised; we do not achieve responsibility by all if we do not encourage and build a strong civic society; and we do not achieve fairness to all if too many people feel excluded from the decision making process.

So the British way forward must be to break up in the name of liberty, centralised institutions that are too remote and insensitive and so devolve power; to encourage in the name of responsibility the creation of strong local institutions; and, in new ways in the name of liberty, responsibility and fairness, to seek to engage the British people in decisions that affect their lives.

So I believe it is imperative that we re-invigorate the constitutional reform agenda we began in 1997.

And I cannot see how the long-term success, legitimacy and credibility of our institutions or our policies can be secured unless our constitutional, social and economic reforms are explicitly founded on these ideas.

Just as on the first day I was Chancellor I limited the power of the executive by giving up government power over interest rates to the Bank of England, I suggested during the General Election there was a case for a further restriction of executive power and a detailed consideration of the role of parliament in the declaration of peace and war. And, of course, founding our constitution on liberty within the law means restricting patronage, for example, in matters such as ecclesiastical and other appointments, so that we prevent any allegation of arbitrary use of power.

I would apply this same approach to constitutional questions such as the issue of House of Lords reform, where, in my view, the two principles that should guide our approach are the primacy of the House of Commons and the need for accountability of the second chamber. At the same time, the next stage of our discussions of human rights should, as people such as Francesca Klug have argued, also take more fully into account the very British idea that individual rights are rooted in ideas of responsibility and community.

Apply also our principles of liberty for all, responsibility by all and fairness to all to the future of our civic society and the responsibilities of citizenship, and we will therefore want to do more to encourage and enhance voluntary initiative, mutual responsibility and local community action.

For two centuries Britain was defined to the world by its proliferation of local clubs, associations, societies and endeavours – from churches and trades unions to municipal initiatives and friendly societies.

And I believe that we should, for this and the coming generation, do more to encourage and empower new British organisations that speak for these British values.

A modern expression of Britishness and our commitment to the future is the creation of British national community service: engaging and rewarding a new generation of young people from all backgrounds to serve their communities; demonstrating our practical commitment to a cohesive and strong society. So just as from America the Peace Corps – and before it, in Britain, British Voluntary Service Overseas – harnessed for the 1960s and beyond a new spirit of idealism and common purpose, in 2006 a new British youth national community service can galvanise and challenge the energies and enthusiasm of a fresh generation of teenagers and young people.

For example, gap years should not be available just for those who can afford to pay, but to young people who cannot afford to pay themselves, but want to make the effort to serve their communities at home and abroad. And we should think of gap months, gap weeks as well as gap years.

Time to serve the community, not just for people going on to higher education, but for people whatever their skills.

And we should consider how we can link up with Asia, Africa and America and I will meet the airlines to ask what more they can do to help sponsor this idea.

In return for service for their country in the USA in the 1940s, the GI Bill helped thousands through college and university and we should consider and debate another idea: helping those who undertake community service with the costs of education, including help with education maintenance allowance and tuition fees for those undertaking community work.

The Russell Commission has recommended a prominent role for British business in this new community endeavour. I am meeting all faith groups to discuss community service. And shortly I will meet business organisations.

And I thank businesses who have already signed up as pioneer sponsors for this idea and today I invite and urge businesses to match fund £100 million – £50 million each from government and business – for long-term funding for this new idea.

Britain can lead the world with a modern national community service.

Responsibility by all in Britain today means also corporate social responsibility – business engagement in voluntary activity, translating the widespread social concern that exists among employers and employees alike into effective action for the common good.

And with corporate social responsibility not as an add on, but at the core of a company's work, Britain can lead the way in a modern approach to corporate responsibility.

We set up Futurebuilders to help existing charities adapt to the modern world. I believe we need to examine how we might do more to encourage new charities and social enterprises, locally and nationally, to start up, develop and flourish, perhaps with a fund for seedcorn finance.

Take mentoring, which is about befriending people especially, in a more isolated society, the most vulnerable. While underdeveloped in Britain in contrast to other countries, mentoring is a modern expression of civic society at work. And we should explore innovative ways – through the internet, TV, local organisations and personal contact – of recruiting and training mentors and linking those who need help and advice to those who can help and advise.

Next, test our principles of liberty, responsibility and fairness and apply them to how we think about local government.

And if, as I argue, the British way is to restore and enhance local initiative and mutual responsibility in civic affairs, we should be doing more to strengthen local institutions.

While all governments have proved to be cautious in devolving power, I hope we can say that – as the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Mayor in London bear witness – this Government has done more to devolve power than any other.

But we must now look to further devolution of power away from Westminster, particularly to a reinvigoration of local government and to schools, hospitals and the self management of local services, the emphasis on empowerment,

communities and individuals realising their promise and potential by taking more control over their lives.

And in doing so we must recognise that people's local sense of belonging is now focused on the immediate neighbourhood. So I welcome the debate on what some call double devolution – on how we reinvigorate democracy at the most local of levels. For example, neighbourhood councils in areas could help harness that sense of belonging and involve people directly in decisions about the services that they use every day. Just as neighbourhood policing – being pioneered here in London as well as elsewhere – is showing, greater local engagement and improved public services can go hand in hand: the police able to respond more quickly to local concerns and local people taking greater responsibility for working with the police to tackle these concerns.

And I believe a genuinely British approach to representative and participatory democracy should explore new ways of involving people in decisions. In various places in Britain and around the world local, regional and even national governments have been experimenting with new ways of involving the public in decision-making – not the usual suspects, the vested interest – but groups of citizens who come together, sometimes in small groups such as citizens' juries, sometimes in large deliberative exercises, to examine important issues of public policy. And I look forward to the considerations of the Power Commission.

A commitment to the British values of liberty, responsibility and fairness also means taking citizenship seriously.

From the quality of citizenship lessons in our schools; to building on the introduction of citizenship ceremonies; to defining not just the rights of citizenship, but the responsibilities too; to finding the best ways of reconciling the rights to liberty for every individual with the needs for security for all; and, of course, an issue we will discuss in detail today – getting the balance right between diversity and integration.

July 7th has rightly led to calls for all of us, including moderates in the Islamic community, to stand up to extremism.

At one level when suicide bombers have connections with other countries and can, in theory, use the internet or be instructed through mobile phones, we know that defeating violent extremists will not be achieved through action in one country alone or one continent, but only globally, through all means: military and security means, but also debate, discussion and dialogue in newspapers, journals, culture, the arts, and literature. And not just through governments, but also through foundations, trusts, civil society and civic culture, as globally we seek to distance extremists from moderates.

But, at another level, terrorism in our midst means that debates, which sometimes may be seen as dry, about Britishness and our model of integration clearly now have a new urgency.

I believe in your discussions today you will conclude that it does entail giving more emphasis to the common glue – a Britishness which welcomes differences, but which is not so loose, so nebulous that it is simply defined as the toleration of difference and leaves a hole where national identity should be.

Instead I have no doubt that a modern commitment to liberty, responsibility and fairness will lead us to measures that bring all parts of the community together to share a common purpose and linked destinies.

Clearly we will have both to tackle prejudice, bigotry and the incitement to hatred and to do far more to tackle discrimination and promote inclusion.

I believe we must address issues about the incitement to hatred, just as I believe that there should now be greater focus on tackling inequalities in job and educational opportunities, driving up the educational attainment of pupils from ethnic minorities and a more comprehensive new deal effort to tackle unacceptably high unemployment in areas of high ethnic minority populations.

Indeed we should do more to help integration. Take the example of those who cannot find work because of language difficulties. Here we should look at expanding mandatory English training. And for those who are trapped in a narrow range of jobs where their lack of fluency in English makes it hard for them to make progress in their careers, we should examine the case for further support. And to back up this effort there should be a national effort for volunteers as well as professionals to mentor new entrants.

And we should also think of what more we can do to develop the ties that bind us more closely together.

The Olympics is but one example of a national project which is uniting the country.

But think for a moment: what is the British equivalent of the US 4th of July, or even the French 14th of July for that matter? What I mean is: what is our equivalent for a national celebration of who we are and what we stand for? And what is our equivalent of the national symbolism of a flag in every garden? In recent years we have had magnificent celebrations of VE Day, the Jubilee and, last year, Trafalgar Day.

Perhaps Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday are the nearest we have come to a British day that is – in every corner of our country – commemorative, unifying, and an expression of British ideas of standing firm in the world in the name of liberty responsibility and fairness?

And let us remember that when people on the centre-left recoiled from national symbols, the BNP tried to steal the Union Jack.

Instead of the BNP using it as symbol of racial division, the flag should be a symbol of unity, part of a modern expression of patriotism.

So we should respond to the BNP by saying the union flag is a flag for Britain, not for the BNP; all the United Kingdom should honour it, not ignore it; we should assert that the union flag is, by definition, a flag for tolerance and inclusion.

And we should not recoil from our national history – rather we should make it more central to our education. I propose that British history should be given much more prominence in the curriculum – not just dates places and names, nor just a set of unconnected facts, but a narrative that encompasses our history. And because citizenship is still taught too much in isolation, I suggest in the current review of the curriculum that we look at how we root the teaching of

citizenship more closely in history. And we should encourage volunteers to be more involved. To help schools bring alive the idea of citizenship with real engagement in the community.

Rediscovering the roots of our identity in our shared beliefs also gives us more confidence in facing difficult questions about our relationship with the rest of the world.

And – instead of a Britain still characterised by doubts about our role in the world, hesitations in particular, grappling uncertainly with issues of integration in a European trade bloc; instead of a Britain seeing the battle as Britain versus Europe, not Britain part of Europe; instead of thinking the European choice is between non engagement and total absorption; a Britain failing to see we can lead the next stage of Europe's development – I believe that, more sure of our values, we can become a Britain that is an increasingly successful leader of the global economy; a global Britain for whom membership of Europe is central; and then go on to help a reformed, more flexible, more outward-looking Europe play a bigger part in global society, not least improving relationships between Europe and the USA.

And, of course, true to our ideals of liberty, responsibility and fairness, Britain leading the way in new measures to make the world safer, more secure and fairer – not just debt relief, the doubling of aid and, reflecting our openness as a nation, by securing a world deal on trade, but, from that foundation, proposing, true to our internationalism, a new way forward: a global new deal – universal free schooling for every child, universal free health care for every family – where the richest countries finally meet our commitments to the poorest of the world. So a modern view of Britishness founded on responsibility, liberty and fairness requires us to:

- demand a new constitutional settlement;
- take citizenship seriously;
- rebuild civic society;
- renew local government;
- work for integration of minorities into a modern Britain, and
- be internationalist at all times.

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