

# Majority needs matter, too



**CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL**

David Davis, the shadow home secretary, warned in a speech at the Tory party conference in Bournemouth on Wednesday that immigration was "endangering the values that we in Britain rightly treasure". It was only a matter of hours before he was attacked on editorial pages as retrograde and nostalgic. One can argue about whether Mr Davis is correct, but nostalgic he is not.

The nostalgic way of talking about migration is by expressing condescension and hostility towards exotic cultures. Mr Davis disavowed this intent at Bournemouth. Instead he spoke, in the approved modern idiom, of protecting a vulnerable ethnic group. What threw his listeners off and sparked accusations of xenophobia and other things is that the ethnic group whose fate concerns him is his own.

Mr Davis's project, in a funny way, resembles that of José Bové, the French peasant activist and anti-corporate militant, who has tried to forge a "French" ethnicity out of symbols, from camembert cheese to berets, that previously had scant political meaning. But there is a difference. Mr Bové, by shifting his focus from the nation-state to the globe, has managed to re-brand the French as a "minority" that can petition for sympathy. Otherwise he has left the normal paradigm of ethnic relations undisturbed. Mr Davis is doing something more controversial: he is implying, if not yet saying, that, under democratic conditions, "Englishness" must remain a majority culture in order to survive.

As such, Mr Davis's views echo a growing preoccupation on the cutting edge of academic sociology: the study of "dominant ethnicity". Ethnic studies tend to focus on marginalised or subordinate minorities – possibly because social-science faculties in the US, quite naturally focused on slavery and its legacy, have set the agenda. But majorities, whether Jews in Israel, Croats in Croatia or the French in France, have needs, too.

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"consumers" of other cultures. It was assumed that, willy-nilly, the national culture would continue to reflect the Wasps' own particular ethnic folkways. That assumption has proved wrong. Bureaucracies and markets have increasingly been tailored round ethnicity, with the paradoxical result that to belong to the "dominant ethnic group" is to be shut off from the wellspring of American culture and from a host of government-conferred privileges. "Unhyphenated" Americans are not eligible for positive discrimination, they cannot vote in other nations (or flee to them if they commit crimes), they cannot mobilise government agencies to defend them if they get fired, they cannot even socialise with non-diverse groups of their own ethnicity. Some dominance!

In its early stages, Mr Kaufmann notes, this dispensation advances egalitarianism, by weakening the most powerful ethnic group. But it does not advance liberalism. It generates no neutral principles under which different ethnicities can live together. And it rests on a myth of ethnic oppression that tends to drift farther from real life. Even today, when Americans of English descent earn incomes below the national median and Wasps have for two decades been underrepresented in corporate boardrooms, multiculturalism draws its legitimacy from the antiquated idea of "a 'moral

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Ignoring dominant ethnicity can create a vicious circle. For the sake of ethnic harmony, the "old", "native" culture abandons symbols that used to tie the society together. Christmas nativity scenes in public areas, for example, always provoke controversy in the US. But as these symbols are dismantled, the country finds it ever harder to command the loyalty and affection of its majority ethnic group. That something similar is happening in Britain is evident to anyone trying to find a restaurant serving English food in London. In a controversial

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Particularly illuminating on this subject is the work of Eric P. Kaufmann, a Canadian sociologist at Birkbeck College (University of London). In his recent book *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America* (Harvard University Press), Mr Kaufmann shows how the culture of "white Anglo-Saxon protestants", or Wasps, was constructed and, from the early 20th century, gradually dismantled. Mr Kaufmann's sympathies are with the cosmopolitan side of this struggle and he is mindful of the damage that dominant ethnic groups have wrought on subordinate ones. But he thinks the US dealt with mass immigration and assimilation through a system that created festering grievances among the majority, not all of which can be dismissed as unreasonable.

Mr Kaufmann calls this system "asymmetrical pluralism". It is the intellectual basis of the diversity and multiculturalism movements in the contemporary US, and the template for programmes dealing with race, culture and ethnicity elsewhere. In the US case, immigrants' culture (constantly confused with their race) came to be esteemed as a "gift" to American diversity. But the previously existing dominant culture was seen as a threat to a fragile new social ecology of ethnic relations. So America's Wasps were offered a new role as cosmopolitan

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Mr Kaufmann's argument, if one accepts it, helps explain why discussions of assimilation are so vexing today and why many Americans have turned against the idea of ethnicity itself. Others may turn against it as well. A Mori poll taken in late September shows that Britons consider "race/immigration/asylum" the second most important issue facing their country today, just behind defence and terrorism. Whether or not Mr Davis has the right answers to the questions he raised, he is addressing the problems of today and not – alas – those of times gone by.

*The writer is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard*