

# Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

## Being British

### Not like 'us'

'I am lots of things. I am Bangladeshi, British, a Muslim, female and also the daughter of working class parents. There are lots of things that define what I am, and I don't think I want to be categorised under one label set by someone else. What does it mean to be British nowadays? Do you have to like fish and chips?' Layli (*Vibes and Voices* March 2006)

Most people living in Britain don't wake up and wonder what it means to be British – in fact for many, the topic is irrelevant. But at certain moments, public discussions about 'What is Britishness?' erupt. A recent increase in immigration, the 2001 disturbances in Oldham, Burnley, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the London bombs of 2005, inspired greater debate about who we all are and what that means in terms of legal rights, access to resources, and a host of other issues. For millions of people, questions of what it means to be British, and how to ensure we can all live together in safety and peace, are very real. In response to this, governments have suggested a Britishness Day or more formal teaching about Britishness. British identity is usually talked about with reference to ideas and values, rather than to blood and soil. That is, the idea that being British is tied to being born in a particular place? Is there such a thing as Britishness? Is there such a thing as British culture? Humour? Food? Behaviour? Many people found themselves waving a Union Jack for the first time ever at the 2012 Olympics. Why?

Some people feel British and love it:

"I'm a Christian in values, a Liberal in politics, Welsh by temperament, English in character and British in identity. I have a fantastic identification with Britain and nobody's more patriotic. I have a deep pride in Britain and things British because I think it's an extraordinarily decent group of countries, good values – fairness, justice, honesty. We've made some awful errors, most recently Iraq...But we'r a good people and this is a good country. We've been incredibly lucky. Shakespeare was right wasn't he? 'This blessed plot'...with all the faults, I have terrific faith in the decency of so-called ordinary people and there are no more decent people on earth. I remain grateful to have been born here, hopeful for the future despite all recent challenges and they are many.'  
(Lord Andrew Phillips)

Others have a more complicated relationship with the country:

"Britain may be a country but it is not really a place. When you emerge from the Channel tunnel by train, the steward welcomes you to England, not to some abstract notion of the United Kingdom or Grande Bretagne. Touching down in Heathrow or Gatwick the cabin crew wish you a pleasant stay in London. This simple point becomes clearer when your port of entry is in Scotland or Wales. Few people expect to be told that they have arrived in Britain when they disembark [from an airplane] in Glasgow or Cardiff [airports]. The moment you realize that you have entered a different country is

# Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

when you pass through immigration controls. As you line up in the appropriate queue to hold out your passport, your relationship to Britain defines who you are and what right you have, or don't have, to be there at all. If you've got that dark red passport you're in. You may not be made welcome by the uniformed officer checking your papers and you may not be thrilled to be back, but as a citizen you have rights and expectations that belong to you by virtue of that document.

Britain is a composite nation, a patchwork of anomalies, mistakes and inconsistencies. It has a standing army but not a football team. It has an anthem, a flag and a queen, but there is no patron saint of the United Kingdom and no founding date of an original constitution to be celebrated with even token formality. Its population is ageing, its children unhappy and its leaders mistrusted. Its budding youth comprises a nation of tribes, identifiable by facial piercings, skin colour, costume, hair style and musical tastes. They speak different languages, comprehensible to each other but which sound unfamiliar to their parents. The prisons are full, the schools lack discipline and the hospitals are overcrowded, over-managed and unclean. Young men plot to commit terrorist attacks on fellow citizens but the wrong suspects are arrested or even shot. The country is at war but it does not honour the soldiers who have died in its name. Its allegiances are split between opposing camps, bound equally to Europe and the United States by history and geography. It still does not know which way to jump or who are its friends. The country that once boasted its own empire is now struggling to find a new role for itself in a vastly unequal global order that it once helped to shape. Welcome to modern Britain.

It is hard to write about the country with affection unless you start to feel sorry for the poor blighters who live there. Like any other nation, its history and culture has produced recognisable stereotypes but being British, its national characteristics and flaws are recognised the world over. By and large they drink too much, swear too much, blame the government for everything and laugh at themselves when things get rough. Or going to the other extreme, they keep a stiff upper lip and smile politely; no sex please, we're British.

And it is easy to make it sound like a mess, a dysfunctional family masquerading as an imaginary nation, one that definitely has a past but which promises a rather uncertain future. The notion of pride in being British is best left to the Olympics where it intermittently makes sense. Until recently one of the most characteristically British things you could possibly do is not talk seriously about what it means to be British. Not unless you were a white supremacist nutcase with an axe to grind. There is national identity and there is the identity of a nation. Britain is an old country, wherever you decide to date its origins. It has been around long enough to have survived layers of identity crises, regardless of who or what provoked them. But the old stories that kept it going no longer do the trick. The victory against fascism that masked the humiliation of giving up empire is losing its unifying effect as the multinational generation that won the 1939-45 war is passing away.

# Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

The future looks scary with the prospect of climate change altering the distinctive ecology of the British Isles let alone curtailing the right to foreign holidays. Refugees from wars, famine and endemic poverty are straining to be allowed in. Talk of the clash of civilisations both within the country and the world at large, fuelled by a nuclear arms race, leads to apocalyptic visions of mutual destruction. The word 'security' is supposed to make us feel safe, but in promising protection it undermines established liberties and tightens state control.

Lately we are told that something called Britishness is the solution to many of these problems. First and foremost it is not the country that is having the crisis. It's the people who live there who have lost their sense of how lucky they are. Sometimes it can sound like a veiled threat. Let's teach them what Britishness means and we will all pull together. If they don't like it they can shut up or get out. Other times it can appear more benign. Let's sit down and talk about what our values really are, what distinguishes us as a nation and what makes us stick together. There are many agendas at work: migration, racism, terrorism, security, privatisation, foreign policy, globalisation, multiculturalism, social justice, education, citizenship, democracy. All demand attention under the heading of national interests, and all are marked urgent." (*Who Cares About Britishness? A Global View of the National Identity Debate*, Vron Ware 2007)

In his campaign to promote an inclusive Britain, the musician and writer Billy Bragg argues for a patriotism which enables people to feel proud of their country by celebrating the most democratic and freedom loving aspects of its past.

'Identity is a very personal thing, and no amount of me saying, 'you're English mate' will make them feel English if they don't feel it.' (3 Monkeys) 'I do think we need to talk about the issue of identity, about who we are...We live in a very multicultural society, perhaps the most multicultural in Europe. What actually binds us together? Well, interestingly the thing that binds us together is our civic identity which is Britishness. The British have a fine tradition of campaigning for their rights, particularly the right to be included within the protection of the law, which dates all the way back to the central principles of Magna Carta in 1215. The idea 'of government by consent and equality under the law has shaped the character of the English people ever since, as they have sought to define themselves in opposition to arbitrary power'. In 1649 the king was executed and 'it is from this drastic act that our modern liberties derive although it took 200 years to win the vote for all.'" (*The Progressive Patriot*)

Bragg believes that the diversity of the players on a football squad may best capture the new England. He explains, "Take a look at the 11 men who were wearing that shirt on the pitch. They are a visible representation of what England is: a multicultural society in which the right to play for the national team is not decided by race, but by talent. ..Far from representing a narrow definition of English identity, those thousands of St George's flags could be seen as an endorsement of this idea, in which the right to be English is accessible to anyone, no matter what their background.'" (*Red Pepper*, 2004)

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## **Discussion:**

Prior to the reading ask students to make an identity chart for themselves. Do they include Britishness or being British? Why or why not? Briefly reflect on that question and then read the resource.

After reading the piece ask students to return to their identity chart, how might they make an identity chart of "Britishness"? What characteristics would be included? First have students work on the chart individually and then in pairs and then in small group. Have small groups share their identity charts. What informed their choices? What did charts have in common? What differences stood out? Compare the charts with the ideas provided by Lord Philips, Vron Ware and Billy Bragg. Are there ideas in common? What are the differences?

The reading suggests that during difficult times, questions of identity become more important. The reading refers to the 2005 attacks on London buses and tubes and the war in Iraq for example. What is the relationship between events like these and discussions of identity?

When was the last time you thought of yourself as "British"? What prompted you to think about yourself in that way?