

**British Cultural (Re)Branding. The Cool Britannia Project or  
Great Britain between the Old and the New**

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**Abstract**

This article theoretically discusses the national identity concept and its relation to the upholding of those distinctive elements that are associated with a country's or a nation's past. With a particular focus on the perceptions of British national identity in the 1990s, it presents some views of British academics, political pundits, politicians or journalists of those times regarding the state of the British society caught between the old and the new. The 'Cool Britannia' project proposed by the New Labour government aimed to resolve matters largely connected to a declining British society by putting forward a national rebranding plan, with the ultimate intention of modernizing a backward-looking British society at the turn of the century.

**Keywords:** *national identity, the celebration of the past, decline, rebranding, Cool Britannia*

**1. Introduction. National identity**

The promotion of national identities, in a large sense, and of cultural identities, in a more restricted sense, is crucial in the context of globalizing, unifying and multicultural environments, increasing intercultural connections and liaisons, and fast changes. The maintenance of the specificities and authenticity of communities, resting on those distinctive elements that define their national identity, is often attributed to or rests on upholding and reviving the heritage of the past. National identity revolves around the idea of congruity and

contains a common language, a historic territory or homeland, myths and historical memories, a common history, a mass public culture, legal rights and duties, an economy with territorial mobility for members (Smith 1991: 14), as well as a common political system. Collective values resulting from the joint contribution of cultural elements, such as language, literature, religion, arts and styles, architecture, customs, morality, notions of kinship and national feeling can be seen as important ties that express the continuity of the past into the present.

The endurance and continuity of national identity features in time represent a testimony of the nation's historical past, it is a mode of getting to know and interpreting the world, man, and his evolution, including ways to understand the present. Endowed with specific cultural elements, such as language and literature, religious patterns, traditions, artistic productions, cuisine, sport, and architecture (identified by Dinnie 2008: 119), communities and nations, and we will make specific reference to the British one, seek to find ways to reconcile the old and the new, the purely British with the foreign influences, or stability and a sense of belonging with change.

Among others, a rich supply of literary works, buildings, rituals or practices generate national specificity and uniqueness stored in layers of millenary culture, building an orientational axis, as it is in the case of the Romanians, as Vulcănescu shows (1991: 92). By way of example, we believe that specific Romanian identity markers, such as the cultivation of language, the spiritual dimension, respect for traditions, customs, ancestors and centuries-old practices and institutions, the celebration of the past and its glory, a close communion with one's fellows and the community, the concept of family, an intimate bond with nature, commitment to place, the land and its produce, openness to the archetypal existential condition, patriotism and sovereignty, autochthonism, wisdom, hospitality and generosity, simplicity, peace of mind, perseverance, stability, social homogeneity and intimacy, preservation and conservatism, a

particular work ethic, or an attachment to celebration and ceremony are only some of the fundamental elements of an axiological axis on which the Romanian cultural and, by extension, national identity is shaped.

The ancestral values, practices, and all national identity markers, be they tangible or intangible forms of collective identity, are maintained, thus continually experienced, performed, and revived, while the cultural heritage and identity patterns of a community are transferred from one generation to the next. Thus, the promotion and any kind of exploitation (cultural, economic, etc.) of traditionally valued myths, codes, principles, beliefs and iconic places or people contribute to the understanding of national cultures and people employ and uphold them in order to symbolically express and maintain their own identity.

Major British national identity components also stem from preservation or promotion/exploitation of tradition, myth, literature, politics or social life associated with the past. Among others, national identity brings together specific myths and legends, social practices, rituals and life styles (shepherding, cultivating the land, trade, sea faring, tea drinking, pub going), great historical events (from the Battle of Hastings to the Battle of Britain), food and drinks (the characteristic English breakfast, warm beer, pudding), spaces (cliffs, pubs, Big Ben, The Tower of London, Stonehenge, The Palace of Westminster, Buckingham Palace, St. Paul's Cathedral, the English house), great personalities (William Shakespeare, Francis Drake, Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill), or vestigial institutions (the monarchy, the Parliament, the Church, the system of law).

Fictional works written after WWII or at the turn of the century, such as Julian Barnes' *England, England* or Malcolm Bradbury's *All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go* also ponder on the those enduring national characteristics even if they were written in times commonly associated with change, including the weakening of the Britishness concept. Barnes's collection of "Fifty Quintessences of Englishness" (Barnes 1998/2012: 83-85) includes some of those

characteristics mentioned above, while Bradbury claims that it is “in these residual, permanently nineteenth-century qualities” such as stiff upper lippery, non-ostentation, superiority to foreigners, muddling through, belief in the unchangeable nature of things “that our society maintains itself” (Bradbury 1960/2000: 9–13). Political parties like the New Labour seemed to turn their back on the past, envisioning a ‘cool’ new Britain, a fashionable and hip country that must (at least partially) rethink or reassess the contemporary relevance of its past in a way that would better suit its future, perhaps as a form of discontent regarding the present, or perchance as just a political and marketing tactic to generate mass support for their agenda.

## **2. The English fondness for the past**

When asked where he would like to be at the end of the world, the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine answered that his preference would go for “England, because everything happens a hundred years later here” (Mark Leonard in Oakland 2005: 51). While this may also be associated with backwardness and slow change, it may equally recognize the English and, by extension, British fondness for and upholding of the past.

Peter Ackroyd remarked that we can identify many important English writers whose writings were subtly imbued by the world of the past, who were “unwilling, or unable, to insert their work into the present moment” (Ackroyd 2002: 252). This attitude may be interpreted as “a matter of reticence and embarrassment, but it also represents a signal tendency within the national temperament” (*ibid.*).

Associated with ideas of conservatism and preservation, the celebration of the past is one of the golden threads that hold together the English national character. Ackroyd (2002: 244–252) reflects on this nostalgic longing for the past, surveying English history since its beginnings, the Anglo-Saxons themselves paying homage to former times and values, often embodied in the form of ruins. The “consciousness” of the past continued in the early Middle Ages, with

testimony in the literary works of the period. The Tudor scholars were also interested in the past with the aim of validating the dynastic policies of the period and their roots in the myths and legends of the country. Moreover, the revival lying at the heart of the Renaissance also meant reviving the classical values. The eighteenth century people's reassessment of ancient music also certifies the significance of history. Investing time and effort in expansion and progress, the Victorians did not neglect their past. Aware that a strong future also rests on the accomplishments of the past, the Victorians were also driven by the belief that "progress" needs to be joined by "a deep need for revival" (Ackroyd 2002: 250), and that "a period of unprecedented industrial and commercial expansion should also be a period of unremitting nostalgia" (*ibid.*: 251). Even architecture, one can notice, confirms the idea of endurance and continuity, as it is the case of many English buildings, including the English house, and, paradoxically, of the "New Towns" built after the Second World War (*ibid.*: 253).

This golden thread of continuity, permanence and durability emphasized by Peter Ackroyd in his conclusive remarks from the chapter entitled "The Conservative Tendency" (Ackroyd 2002: 253–254) appears to be a distinctive element of English identity. Though at times it was apparently cleared, it cannot be erased or unrooted, just as in the case of London which has indeed gone through plagues, fires and other forms of destruction, but whose "powers and forces of past time (...) remain visible beneath the surface of the earth" (*ibid.*: 254).

Britain's past glories connected to its world trade supremacy, economic and industrial lead, or its imperial status, have helped maintaining a love of the past, a sense of pride, and perhaps an unconscious wish to preserve these glories as a continuation of Britain's stability and power over time.

### **3. Fighting decline or how to become forward-looking**

Decades of industrial strife and economic downturn in the 1960s and 1970s, which earned Britain the title of the 'sick man of Europe', followed by the sometimes disputed policies of Thatcherite

Conservative government, made people create a special sense of expectation regarding the 1990s and the promises of the New Labour.

When the New Labour rose to power in 1997 after a Conservative regime, its members negatively responded to what they saw as a backward-looking attitude of the English, especially of their political predecessors. The 'antiquarian' spirit was connected to the celebration of the glory of the past, with the (otherwise temporary) conservative government being held responsible for that. However, as we have seen, the glorification of the past seems to be a deeply ingrained national feature.

The new ideology of change also came as reaction against the ideology of decline that largely defined the English spirit following WWII and which affected moral, social, political and economic areas. In the chapter "Contemporary Britain: the context", John Oakland (2005) and the authors he selected from politics or academia to mass media discuss these areas of decline and identify "large-scale issues such as the weakness of the economic system, political and institutional inadequacies, imperial decline, the alleged non-competitive nature of the British society and the performance (or lack of it) of national institutions" (Oakland 2005: 2). Having to come to terms with the loss of its imperial status, the weakening of its economic vigour (with several period of recession) and its financial predominance, Britain had to come up with a plan of cultural, economic and political rejuvenation and boosting up, or this is what the British politicians felt.

Commentators like Andrew Gamble (in Oakland 2005: 5-9) looked for causes of this decline, including more spending as compared to producing, overmanning, the social conservatism in all aspects of social life, especially in education and business management, the attitudes of the political elites as part of the Establishment that resisted change, Britain's oscillating attitudes regarding an increasingly interdependent and global economy, low investment, low productivity, unemployment, the manufacturing

downward movement or deindustrialization, among others. In some commentators' view, it was also the Establishment's members, or those members of the ruling elite that were to be held responsible for the slow changes in society, including people from such institutions as "the monarchy, the Church of England, the legal system, Parliament, the Civil Service (Whitehall), the older professions, the ancient universities and the independent (private) schools" (Oakland 2005: 11). On the other hand, the Liberal Democrat Paddy Ashdown argued (in Oakland 2005: 15) that the society had changed, with the exception of politics, still based on "the left-right, two-party confrontational Westminster" politics, leading to "an anachronistic hindrance to effective governance" (*ibid.*).

Although the origin of the phrase 'Cool Britannia' has been a debated issue, it is certain that what it led to was an intended rebranding process, the term as such being used by a member of Prime Minister Tony Blair's group, Mark Leonard. The rebranding project proposed by Blair involved a change of image or giving Britain a new image in order to position it, as it happens with companies, organizations, products or services, more attractively and successfully on the international scene or market. Given its marketing resonance, the concept's application to nations also alludes to the financial and economic gains of such a process. Especially by means of tourism, the financial benefits become apparent, confirming one of Barnes' characters from *England, England's* vision that "we are the new pioneers, we must sell our past to other nations as their future" (Barnes 2012: 40).

As the next section shows, the 'Cool Britannia' project of modernization received public criticism. Its insistence on revitalization, updating, progressive thinking, renewal, or forward-looking attitudes, collided with views that the project denied the importance of the past and thus disregarded the continuity of British identity. The modernization it advocated seemed in opposition with the upholding of Britain's pride in the past glories and other identity markers of the past that had permeated the national fibre. On the other

hand, Tony Blair dismissed such accusations and stressed on the fusion of old and new, on repositioning what is valuable from the past and presenting it in a new way, on harmonizing what is valuable from the past with the present rather than renouncing the past as his contenders claimed.

#### **4. 'Cool Britannia': making Britannia a cool place**

The phrase as such seems to capture something of the old and the new. A blend of the adjective "cool" and of the title-motto "Rule, Britannia!", it refers to the 1990s increased pride in British culture.<sup>1</sup> The phrase brings together the patriotic feeling regarding Britain's (past) sea glory or its imperial dominance echoed by the Rule Britannia song and the novelty of bringing Britain's identity up to date with 'cool' contemporary challenges and realities. The result would show that, as PM Tony Blair stressed, "Britain is on a roll" (in Oakland 2005: 53), a very good, excellent place to live and work in.

As in the case of the marketing phenomena, the rebranding process seeks to develop a new identity based on the already established identity, so it inevitably rests on its prior identity forms. However, national identity conceptions do not always rest on absolutely unchangeable markers or on totally productive elements. Thus, what Blair proposed was a sort of cleansing regarding those features of national identity that were no longer workable as they did not ensure progress, maintaining prejudice, demarcations and hierarchies. All the more, old associations of foreigners with old images of Britain were felt to be no longer beneficial since being stuck in the past kept the country unable to keep the pace with other fast-moving countries. Changing perceptions of national identity was an imperative for the fathers of the project, in an attempt to move from a backward-looking to a forward-thinking country whose international role would benefit from the change.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.yourdictionary.com/cool-britannia>, accessed September 23, 2019.



In an age in which the visual and the image, in general, influence and dominate mindsets, their relevance is increasingly noticed. Again as in the case of marketing phenomena, a country's image speaks about its underlying national characteristics, and so it may sometimes need a reshuffle when what it transmits to the world is no longer a viable option, as pro-Labour broadcaster Melvyn Bragg (in Oakland 2005: 62) points out: "Our past is very fine and very secure and we are proud of it and sometimes over-addicted to it. Blair is right: it is no good for the future if the image of Britain is irredeemably fustian ... As the multiplicity of television channels grows, image will be a crucial part of any success."

For some, changes were slow or barely existing; for others, change had already been adopted by the British society at large, while the political realm was still reluctant to it. The image that needed to be fashioned, Mark Leonard believed, responded to "the new reality of a country that is self-confident, creative, tolerant, ethically-diverse and connected to the world" (Leonard in Oakland 2005: 52).

Regarding the culture of the period, ideas associated with youth, such as growth, development, or transition to independence may have served the new ideology of change well. The New Labour "was using youth culture to signify its up-to-date qualities, its investment in the future and as a strategy by which it may claim hope as one of its central values" (Hubble et al. 2017: 15). The cultural spirit of the new age was epitomized by Britpop, TV sitcoms, shows, fashions, and ultimately aimed at "breaking down cultural class barriers", as *Telegraph* journalist Michael Deacon (2012) comments.

What other strategies and policies did this ideology of change advocate? For instance, it supported the modernization of the economy, the old industries like textile, cotton, wool, coal or ship-building industries being replaced by new ones, with a special focus on the creative industries or the service industry. The welfare system protecting the health and well-being of the (disadvantaged) people also came under fire as it drained the country's financial resources. The New Deal programme aimed to give young people the first

opportunity to get a job, with the aim of reducing unemployment levels. Constitutional reform was also needed in creating a “young country”, to quote a part of Tony Blair’s book title *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (1996), a book that had paved the way to such changes. Institutions needed restructuring; mentalities needed changing in line with recognition based on merit (meritocracy), not privilege. The project thus planned reducing the power of the hereditary peers sitting in the House of Lords.

What Tony Blair himself seemed to suggest (Blair in Oakland 2005: 53–55) is that his project was using new tools based on old values or that the same old values can be put to better uses that respond to the needs of reinvention and remaking. From this essay, we can deduce the necessity of operating a selection of what was still workable in order to build the future on stronger and more adequate grounds. More than simply being cool, trendy or hip, it was about “being modern and forward-thinking and believing in the future” (Blair in Oakland 2005: 54). The national characteristics he identified had adapted to the changes already in place: “we are tolerant and open-minded: a multicultural society that works. We are innovative and pioneering (...), we are compassionate and fair-minded” (*ibid.*). Broadcasters that supported the New Labour vision highlighted that the Government wished to focus on “newness and change. Not to fabricate it, because it is already there. Not to give it precedence, because this is a government sensible of tradition. But to give it a profile (Melvyn Bragg in Oakland 2005: 61).

Blair also attacks the mistaken conception that his programme of modernization meant “abandoning the past” (*ibid.*), which is not only untrue but also impossible since

I have always believed that it is by building on our history that we can be most successful. A country’s identity cannot be started from scratch. It is an accumulation of centuries of proud history. Why should the nation of Shakespeare, Elgar,

Constable and some of the finest castles and cathedrals and palaces ever wish to betray the richness of that heritage? I certainly don't. (*ibid.*)

The breaking down of barriers related to class and status also meant renouncing the image of aristocratic privilege and merit associated with a remarkable few. On the whole, in the 1997 election campaign, Tony Blair transmitted, by means of his rhetorical style and use of body language, "an image of personable, middle-class authenticity" (van den Akker et al. 2017: 171), his style illustrating the "public construction of normalness" (Fairclough 2000 cited by van den Akker et al. 2017: 171). The image of someone ordinary more easily enabled the common people to identify with Blair.

On the whole, the critical views his project received included the idea that it was intended mostly for the young, it positively affected metropolitan spaces like London while other former industrial cities were still lagging behind economically, it was mostly an urban phenomenon, it involved mostly the upper class (still) and neglected the lower society, it sought to relinquish the past, or that it was ephemeral and had no solid foundations. In the view of two American journalists, one of whom is believed to have coined the phrase 'Cool Britannia' in 1996, Blair "swaddled a bastion of very old Britain in the shiny foil of Cool Britannia" (Stryker McGuire, the coiner of the phrase, and William Underhill in Oakland 2005: 56). Right-of-centre *Daily Mail* journalist Stephen Glover also criticized the programme from more perspectives. Firstly, it was the creation of what was seen as "the new establishment (...) based on money, business, and popular culture" (Glover in Oakland 2005: 59), so the same kind of ruling elite was still in control and planned a financially driven programme. Secondly, the radical reorganization plans of the society "from top to bottom" (*ibid.*) were grounded on their obsession of forced and engineered change. Thirdly, Britain had not been living outside change, so it seemed unnecessary to add changes to those already happening. In effect, people wanted stability in a fast changing world.

Sadly enough, they suggest that too much change can backfire, it can be destructive or can at least produce negative results.

### Conclusions

As we have seen, the New Labour's modernization plan of the late 1990s collided with views that supported the maintenance of national identity features that came especially from the past. We may say that Britain's (or, in a more restricted sense, England's) "deep conservatism" also discussed by Jeremy Paxman (1999: 154–156) was then put to the test. Such emblems, ceremonies or institutions of the past as "barristers' wigs, bearskins, an unselected House of Lords, flummeries from the Trooping the Colour to Swan-upping, or archaic-sounding offices of state like Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster or Warden of the Cinque Ports" (*ibid.*: 154) were seen by some as "utterly pointless" (*ibid.*). In the view of more conservative others, it was from the set of national identity markers that continued from the past that the nation's endurance, durability and stability stemmed, to secure Britain's everlasting existence, the reconstruction of national identity being, therefore, unnecessary.

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