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**Reconceiving the British Isles:
The Literature of the Archipelago**

Series Editor: John Brannigan

General Editor: P.J. Mathews

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Nick Groom

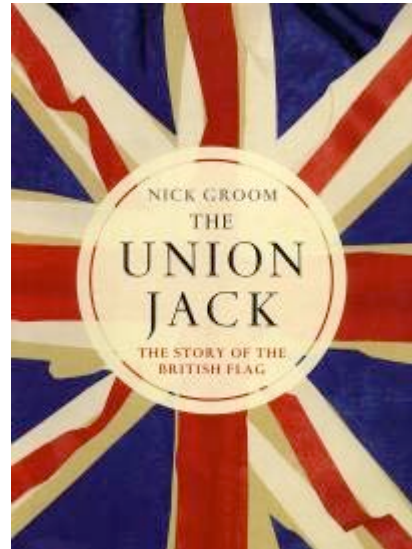
Alright, Jack? Conflict and Cohesion in Britain, 2005-10

‘The Governance of Britain’ was the inaugural Green Paper of Gordon Brown’s government. It was prepared by Justice Minister Jack Straw and concluded that the country needed to clarify what it meant to be British, proposing ‘to work with the public to develop a British statement of values’.

Following its publication on 3 July 2007 I was asked to write a couple of paragraphs for a special issue of *Prospect* magazine, ‘In Search of British Values’ (October 2007). Despite the fashion for claiming that British identity is imprecise and indefinable, my response was to suggest that British identity is no more imprecise than the ‘Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité’ of the French, or the ‘Land of the Free’ of the Americans. Britishness is popularly identified with ‘fair play’: the refusal of dogma and ideology, and a reliance on compromise and pragmatism through convention and organic evolution – whether in government by parliamentary democracy, or culturally in the infinite flexibility of the English language. But although such an answer reflects the results of the 2004 British Social Attitudes survey and similar polls, it is perhaps unlikely that it is an answer that a newly-forged government would wish to hear.¹

Furthermore, having recently written a book on the history of the Union Jack (published in 2006), I also pointed out the prospect that the design of the Union Jack flag is effectively both a map and a history of the union, where each component – the crosses variously of national Sts George, Andrew, and Patrick – has been adapted in relation to the others. This narrative of compromise is one of the key points of the book, as my approach was to make the Union Jack the subject of a cultural history: analyzing the flag as a sign that has meant different things in different contexts.² So how far did Brown’s government get with its ‘British statement of values’, and how did understandings of British identity influence the election on 6 May 2010?³

My study of *The Union Jack* concluded with an account of a speech given by David Blunkett on 14 March 2005. In ‘A New England: An English Identity within Britain’, Blunkett, who had returned to the back benches following his controversial time as Home Secretary, declared the need to ‘champion Englishness’: ‘The challenge [he said] is to recast Englishness and English identity, exploring its place within the Union



and its relationship with Europe and the wider world.’⁴ These suggestions developed his earlier remarks on *British* identity made in 2002, which famously suggested that in the interests of an integrated society, British Asian families should speak English at home. What is notable about Blunkett on England, however, is that he recognized the political, social, and cultural ground on which New Englishness could be expressed, and was very careful to contain that ground within the wider concept of the Union, the United Kingdom.

The call however fell on deaf ears – except perhaps those of the Campaign for an English Parliament. Instead, New Labour were sorely punished, if not thoroughly beaten, at the 2005 polls and two years later Blair resigned in favour of his Chancellor Gordon Brown. Another Scot (arguably the Labour Party hasn’t had an English leader since James Callaghan), Brown nailed his colours to the mast straightaway – and quite literally. He immediately declared his Britishness and stated his intention that the British flag, the Union Jack, should be flown more prominently (the ‘Governance of Britain’ Green Paper says so in no uncertain terms), and in his first statement to the House of Commons as Prime Minister (3 July 2007), Brown ordered that all Government buildings should fly the flag every day to help engender a sense of British identity. Within two days, the flag had been hoisted over No. 10, the Treasury, the Revenue and Customs building, and the Departments of Culture and Health. Moreover, a spokesperson for the Culture Department was reported as saying that the new Prime Minister also hoped that other public buildings (police stations, prisons, and hospitals) would do likewise. Previous to this, there had been fewer than twenty flag days a year, predominantly for royal birthdays and anniversaries.⁵ Brown’s move was striking, and could almost be read as a covert acknowledgement of the 300th anniversary of the 1707 Act of Union between England (and Wales) and Scotland, which was otherwise barely remarked upon.

The iconic nature of the flag is fully acknowledged in ‘The Governance of Britain’, which argues that [and I quote]:

Symbols can help to embody a national culture and citizenship. The Union Flag is one of the most recognisable symbols of the UK. But while in other countries, such as France and the United States, the national flag is regarded as a source of pride, in recent years the Union Flag has all too often become the preserve of political extremists, a symbol of discord rather than harmony. It is critical that this symbol is not hijacked by those who seek to work against values of tolerance and respect.⁶ [So that’s Jack Straw]

Interviewed subsequently on ITN, Gordon Brown said that ‘what united the British people – liberty, a sense of responsibility, fairness – was reflected in common symbols

such as the monarchy, Parliament and the Union flag'.⁷ Which is all well and good (and makes me sound rather like a Brownite), but Brown and Straw's cards were on the table to restore the Union Jack and confirm British values.

* * *

When the proposal came to abandon the limited number of flag days, this was wrongly reported in some quarters as being a law dating from 1924. In fact, the Union Jack has, except at sea, escaped any such legal restrictions, and the outbreak of Union Jackery following the Brown-Straw initiative is the most significant parliamentary intervention virtually in living memory. The last official pronouncement on the Union Jack was made on 27 June 1933, replying to a question about whether private citizens were forbidden to fly the Union Jack for the silver jubilee of George V in 1935. Sir John Gilmour, then Home Secretary, commented, 'No, Sir, the Union Flag is the national flag and may properly be flown by any British subject on land'.⁸ No single Government Department or public body has overall jurisdiction over the Union Jack or for any policy concerning it. The Union Jack may be flown at any time.⁹ Moreover, the colours, dimensions, and uses of the flag are not legally restricted – unlike the Stars and Stripes, for example – and this has been crucial in ensuring the continuing reinvention of the Union Jack. The 'Rules for Hoisting Flags on Government Buildings' do not extend – and never have – to private citizens or businesses of Great Britain.

Eight months after the Green Paper, the original eighteen flag days were formally abandoned and public buildings could fly the flag every day.¹⁰ Moreover, the national flags of England, Scotland, and Wales were also permitted to be flown, although Northern Ireland remains governed by its own Flags Regulations (2000). The Scottish Parliament welcomed the development. A 'senior Scottish government source' was reported as saying, 'It's a recognition that we are in charge of our flag flying arrangements', which wasn't quite true, but was clearly how the news was interpreted.¹¹

The Red Dragon, meanwhile, has only been recognized as the national flag of Wales comparatively recently, and is something of an anomaly here.¹² Based on the medieval identification of Wales with the dragon, this design was one of Henry Tudor's heraldic standards, although it was also (ironically) a traditional English ensign flown, for example, at the battles of Hastings and Agincourt. As Henry VII, the Tudor king introduced it into the Royal Standard as a supporter, but it was later replaced by the Scottish unicorn of the Stuarts, and Wales was not included in any of the Union Flag designs by heralds from the time of James I to that of Queen Anne and later George III. This leads Richard Weight to note pointedly that 'in a sense, therefore, it was the Scots and Germans, and not the English, who erased the Welsh from the British mind'.¹³ But

there is in fact a less contentious reading of Welsh representation: a tradition that dates back at least to Baden-Powell and the Scout movement that suggests that the red cross of St George is placed on a larger white cross that represents St David, much as the red saltire (or diagonal cross) of St Patrick is placed on the white saltire of St Andrew.

As I have described elsewhere, it was not until the twentieth century that Wales began to assert its identity within Britain and to reconsider its perceived vexillological invisibility. Consequently, the Welsh petitioned the government five times between 1897 and 1945 to request that the Welsh dragon be included in the Royal Arms – note, the Royal Arms, not the Union Jack. Each time they were refused because, in the words of the College of Arms, Wales had never been a kingdom and that therefore ‘There is no such thing as a Welsh national flag’.¹⁴ Eventually in 1953 – the coronation year – the palace offered a compromise in the shape of a new royal badge. This was, however, rejected and the old, popular Welsh dragon continued to be seen at rugby matches and in souvenir shops. By 1958 a campaign had been launched to save the traditional dragon, and the authorities eventually conceded. The Red Dragon became official on 1 January 1960 – official in the sense that it is a Royal Standard and not a national flag and therefore analogous to the English three lions (which are technically leopards) or the Scottish ruddy lion. By an Act of 1679, the misuse of the Royal Arms remains a capital offence: indeed, Scotland’s Lyon Court has prosecuted tradesmen for ‘usurping’ the red lion, and admonished the Scottish National Party and Glasgow Rangers for using the red lion with the cross of St Andrew.¹⁵

It is against this background, a veritable cat’s cradle of significations, that Ian Lucas (Labour MP for Wrexham) brought up the question of Welsh representation during the debate on ‘The Governance of Britain’ Green Paper in the House of Commons on 27 November 2007.¹⁶ Lucas called for a new Union Jack – one that would incorporate the red dragon (at the centre of the flag, for some reason), and in doing so he mixed up national identity with royal symbolism.



Lucas referred bitterly to the 1535/6 ‘takeover’ of Wales by England – a ‘takeover’ that was in fact effected by Henry VIII, a Tudor monarch, whose Welsh father had fifty years previously defeated and slain Richard III, the last Plantagenet king of *England*, at Bosworth Field (1485).¹⁷ It is worth noting, then, that there is a far less antagonistic reading of the Union Jack in which the cross of St George represents *both* England and

Wales, as adopted by the Tudors. In other words, the question of representation could equally be posed to ask why there is no independent *English* component to the flag.

Lucas's demands for remodelling the flag were promptly overtaken by an avalanche of other proposals, mainly tongue-in-cheek, when the *Telegraph* held an on-line poll for a new design. In addition to variations on the Welsh dragon being incorporated there was one showing St George slaying a dragon and several manga designs, as for some reason this vote caught the imagination of on-line communities in Japan. The eventual winner depicted a traditional flag with a red Japanese anime dragon wearing sunglasses at its centre; it was designed by a Norwegian who elected to remain anonymous.¹⁸



To my knowledge, Lucas has not pursued his suggestion any further following this comprehensive ridicule.

Interestingly, Gordon Brown was able to fly the cross of St George over Downing Street a month later on 23 April (St George's Day), the first time it had been flown since the 2006 football World Cup. Brown's spokesperson said, 'The prime minister's view is that of course we should celebrate our Britishness, but celebrating our Britishness does not mean we cannot also celebrate our Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness or Northern Irishness.'¹⁹

This is an interesting comment. Brown had warned shortly before he became Prime Minister that, as he put it, it 'is now time for supporters of the union to speak up, to resist any drift towards a Balkanisation of Britain and to acknowledge Great Britain for the success it has been and is'.²⁰ The emerging Brown-Straw definition of Britishness was therefore effectively internal multiculturalism, in which Scots, for instance, could expect to celebrate St George's Day within the context of a greater Britishness (much as the English irrepressibly celebrate Burns' Night and St Patrick's Day). Moreover, following his resignation from the post of Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith reviewed British citizenship for Brown. Among a number of proposals he suggested a new 'national day' should be established by 2012 to run alongside the Olympics and the Queen's anticipated Diamond Jubilee, as well as holding allegiance ceremonies for school children to increase national identity. These would be held beneath a Union Jack in landmark buildings such as Tate Britain, the National Gallery, and Edinburgh Castle.²¹ Head teachers and MSPs condemned this latter idea. According to Jim Mather, the Scottish Enterprise Minister,

‘We don’t support it and neither do the vast majority of parents, teachers and children in Scotland’, and Christine Grahame, a Nationalist MSP, said, ‘Gordon Brown is back peddling. One minute he [is] getting us to swear oaths of allegiance to Great Britain, and the next he’s saying we can fly the Saltire.’²² To many the notion of dual nationality, such as being both British and Scottish, was anathema. Under Brown, then, Britishness was not a cohesive identity, it was an identity in conflict – a conflict that focused on apparently irreconcilable differences between the four nations rather than on, say, Black or Asian Britishness.

Liam Byrne pitched in, proposing in June 2008 that the August bank holiday weekend could become the ‘Great British Weekend for people to celebrate what they loved most about the country’ – which as the *Telegraph* archly pointed out, would at least mean that workers would not receive the benefit of an additional public holiday. This suggestion was also immediately divisive, as while for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland summer Bank Holiday is in the last week of August, for Scotland it is in the *first* week of August – and bank holidays for some national saints and not others, not to mention one for the Battle of the Boyne in Northern Ireland, are another proverbial political minefield.²³ Britishness was certainly in the air in the first half of 2008: shortly before Liam Byrne’s gaffe, Culture Minister Margaret Hodge had been criticized for comments she made about the Proms being too exclusive.²⁴ She seemed to be thinking solely of the idiosyncratic Last Night of the Proms celebrations – certainly that’s what David Cameron immediately turned it into, saying,

I think Margaret Hodge is wrong. We want more things where people come together to celebrate Britishness and more occasions when people think the Union Jack is a great symbol of our Britishness, rather than sniping at it. It is a classic example of a Labour politician just not getting some of the things people like to do to celebrate culture and identity and a great British institution.

As Neil Fisher, Classical & Opera Editor of *The Times* put it, ‘David Cameron took Hodge’s blinkered baton and ran with it, arguing that, actually, we want more occasions when people can bond over the Union Jack. And then [he went on] good old Gordon rolled over obediently – horrified by the idea of being out-Britted – and defended the Proms as “quintessentially British”.’²⁵ So this is another example of how in the first year of Gordon Brown’s Premiership, Labour and Conservative fought incessantly over the issue of Britishness, and attempted to define themselves on the field of the cloth of the Union Jack.

* * *

As suggested by his remarks on Balkanization, Brown had in fact been nurturing his model of multicultural Britishness for some time. On 7 July 2004, for example, he concluded the annual British Council lecture by promoting the flag:

I believe [he said] that we should respond to the undermining of an inclusive citizenship by the British National Party by not only fighting their racism but by asserting at every opportunity that the union flag does not belong to a vicious minority, but is a flag for all Britain – symbolising inclusion, tolerance and unity; and that England, Scotland and Wales – whose celebration of national identity is to be welcomed and encouraged – should also honour not just their own flags but the union flag for the shared values it symbolises.²⁶

This motif was carried through in subsequent comments, for example following the 7/7 terrorist attacks in 2005, and in a speech to the Fabian Society in January 2006:

Instead of the BNP using it as a symbol of racial division [Brown declared], the flag should be a symbol of unity and part of a modern expression of patriotism too. All the United Kingdom should honour it, not ignore it. We should assert that the Union flag by definition is a flag for tolerance and inclusion.²⁷ [So that's Brown before he became Prime Minister]

The flag should at least be a reminder that Britain is a union between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and as I have noted it can be read both as a symbolic map and as the history of the union. It is a design based on compromise, which interestingly places Scotland as the senior partner in the union in the most prestigious position (the top-left quadrant); it was also designed by an Englishman on the orders of a Scottish king, James VI and I, and so is effectively the Scottish innovation of an English invention.²⁸

Nevertheless, Gordon Brown's invocation of the far Right's appropriation of the Union Jack divulges a favourite, if crippling, prejudice of the Left. Paul Laity for example wrote in *The New Statesman* that 'No attempt to refresh the Union Jack will get rid of its stale odour of aristocracy and empire.'²⁹ In fact, it is precisely because the Left allowed the extremists to set the agenda in the 1970s that so many in the Labour Party now have a knee-jerk reaction against the Union Jack, refusing to recognize the plurality of meanings in what is a remarkably fluid and adaptable design. This has fatally undermined their own position. One is reminded of George Orwell's words of warning in 'The Lion and the Unicorn':

If you were an intellectual [he wrote in 1941] you sniggered at the Union Jack and regarded physical courage as barbarous. It is obvious that this preposterous

convention cannot continue. The Bloomsbury highbrow, with his mechanical snigger, is as out-of-date as the cavalry colonel.³⁰

The Brown-Straw-Goldsmith initiative at least attempted to address this failure by belatedly reclaiming the flag, but clearly opposition came not only from Welsh and Scottish nationalist factions, but also from Socialist *ressentiment*.

So do Paul Laity and his kind really smell the ‘stale odour of aristocracy and empire’ whenever they see Geri Halliwell in a Union Jack minidress, or buy a packet of carrots grown in Lincolnshire bearing a flag on the packaging, or see Noel Gallagher playing a Union Jack guitar? The image is absolutely everywhere. A walk down any British High Street reveals dozens of Union Jacks. It is a design popular with, for example, Paul Smith, Ben Sherman, Next, and Boden – indeed, the *Guardian* recently commented on what could be termed the ‘Bodenisation’ of the Union Jack via Lulu Guinness clutch bags, Jonathan Aston tights, and the ubiquitous and super-middle-class Boden style.³¹ Union Jack accessories include mugs from Emma Bridgewater and B&Q lamps, and *Woman* magazine recently included a ‘Fly the Flag’ accessories feature. Likewise, fashionista Lisa Armstrong has described how the flag has recently been used by everyone from Karl Lagerfeld, Alexander McQueen, and Gucci to Topshop and Debenhams. Italian designer Kinder Aggugini, for instance, regularly uses Union Jacks for his fashion exhibition backdrops:

Foreigners love the flag [he says]. For them it has no negative connotations the way it has for some Brits. They don’t look at it and think of colonialism and Millwall football fans. They think of Kate Moss and The Who.

Aggugini particularly notes the fact that the flag comes in thirteen sections (actually, a minimum of fourteen, and many more if sewn): this is itself an invitation to rework its elements.³²

I spent a day counting Union Jacks in a typical English High Street. T-shirts showing a Union Jack in black and white, a Union Jack in tartan on the back of a jacket, a quadrant of a Union Jack on the pocket of a pair of jeans, as well as more obvious flags on the roofs of mini cars, in supermarkets, in newspaper photos of Paul Weller, the Kinks, David Bowie, and the Rolling Stones, and on sports pages. In other words, the flag is being flown in literally thousands of ways – ways that don’t involve flagpoles or oaths of allegiance – by virtue of its existence outside government jurisdiction. These uses do not reek of



far Right extremism, but are the manifestations of a global design icon.

It is in any case revealing that whereas the Left are hyper-sensitive about the Union Jack having British National Party associations, for many Scots it is evidently tainted by English associations. On one newsblog I visited, ‘Bob of [perhaps appropriately] Bannockburn’ wrote:

It was you lot on mass [he writes, *sic*] that went blindly flying only the Union Flag at England football matches, England cricket games, Ibiza sunbeds and anything else to do with England. That is a fact. No one said to do that! You declared then and there the whole Britain = England. That’s why the rest won’t touch that flag. Now you are crying about the Union Flag and want your St George cross? You should of done that to start with and there would of been no problem! [so much for Bob, *sic*]³³

Rants such as this remind me of Renton’s response to Scottish pride in the film *Trainspotting* (1996). Scottish identity is portrayed as being in a fatal embrace with Englishness:

RENTON: I hate being Scottish.... Some people hate the English, but I don’t.

They’re just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonized by.

But the English confusion of England with Britain and the consequent appropriation of the Union Jack that ‘Bob of Bannockburn’ complains about was not simply born of ignorance. In 1805, for example, a Scottish MP declared that, ‘We commonly when speaking of British subjects call them English, be they English, Scotch, or Irish’ [clearly the Welsh already went without saying in 1805],³⁴ and Thomas Campbell, the ‘Scottish Milton’ – a Glaswegian – wrote in 1801, the year of the Act of Union with Ireland, the verse ‘Ye Mariners of England’. It too uses the terms England and Britain interchangeably:

Ye Mariners of England
That guard our native seas,



Whose flag has braved a thousand years,
The battle and the breeze –

And yet there is no mention of this poem, which contains some of the most popular and oft-quoted lines of the nineteenth century, in the entry for Campbell in the current *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

The point I am making is that the confusion between England and Britain is one that Scottish politicians and writers have colluded in. And because historically the English submerged so much of their identity and so many of their institutions into a greater Britishness, the overlap between England and Britain is necessarily very large. From the seventeenth century onwards, England concentrated on the broader concept of Britain – not only because England is much bigger, more populous, and far wealthier than its sister nations, but because English values were precisely those values of contingency that could enable a diverse society to flourish: the mongrel hybridity that Daniel Defoe, for example, celebrates in ‘The True-Born Englishman’, or the dramatic undecideability that came to characterize the qualities of Shakespeare’s poems and plays. Englishness, in other words, is the key component of Britishness, and a strong British identity can ultimately only be founded on a strong English identity. That is the rock on which the Brown-Straw-Goldsmith version of Britishness foundered. The role of England cannot be ignored in the theatre of Britishness; in fact, Britain needs England more than England itself needs the Union.

This state of affairs is exacerbated by the creeping disparities between the constituent identities of Britain. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland now enjoy a degree of devolution from British government while still voting on English legislation in Westminster, while most English voters seem oblivious of these inequalities. I won’t pursue the West Lothian Question here, except to say that a cynic might point out that the Labour Party is increasingly reliant upon British unity for its political wellbeing – arguably almost for its very existence: in the 2005 election, more voters in England actually voted Conservative, and yet because of electoral districts weighted in favour of Scotland and Wales (who in any case now each have their own Parliament or National Assembly), many more Labour candidates were returned to Westminster. The Tories meanwhile have most to gain from an English parliament, but have Unionist traditions and allegiances at the very core of their identity and would never initiate a devolutionary programme.

Both parties are stuck, and so after the huge opening fanfare from Gordon Brown in 2007, his version of Britishness now seems to be off the political agenda. There have been occasional flurries that have diverted attention away from the big national

conversation. EU food labelling has occupied Westminster since at least 2003³⁵, and in 2008 concerns flared again with the disclosure that supermarket meals advertised as ‘British’ need not contain any ingredients sourced in Britain.³⁶ As the Conservative MP for South Norfolk, the appropriately named Richard Bacon, put it, pork imported from Denmark and packaged in the UK may be called ‘Product of Britain’, butter churned in England using milk imported from Belgium can lawfully be described as ‘produced in England from milk’, Norwegian salmon can lawfully be described as ‘salmon smoked in Scotland’, and ‘British lamb’ can mean imported lambs slaughtered and packaged in the UK: ‘There is concern [he says] that some companies have taken advantage of these slack regulations, and label their products with the Union Jack accompanied by slogans such as “traditional British food” or “great British recipe” when, in fact, they are not produced in this country.’³⁷

A more serious initiative followed Labour’s entanglement within the folds of the flag: on 5 February 2008 Andrew Rosindell (Conservative MP for Romford) founded the All Party Parliamentary Flag Group and under the Ten Minute Rule introduced The Union Flag Bill.³⁸ This legislation proposed to make provision for the display and flying of the Union Flag, reviving Michael Fabricant’s 1996 proposals to allow the flag to be flown freely, and to formally recognize the name of the ‘Union Jack’.³⁹ Rosindell’s Bill had no chance of being made law, but if nothing else stirred up memories of Labour’s Union Jackery of the previous year. By 27 October 2008, Brown had to admit that the cause had been abandoned and plans for a ‘Britishness Day’ were officially dropped: ‘there are no plans to introduce a national day at the present time’, Constitution Minister Michael Wills told MPs.⁴⁰ Shadow Justice Secretary Nick Herbert commented:

First a national motto, then an oath of allegiance, now a patriotic day – one token initiative after another in Gordon Brown’s Britishness agenda has sunk without trace. Labour still hasn’t worked out that British identity is bound up in our institutions, culture and history. It can’t be re-manufactured by their spin doctors.⁴¹ [he concluded]

By February 2009, in the wake of wildcat strikes in protest at the use of foreign labour and contracts, even *The Guardian* was sniping at Labour. Political Editor Toby Helm pointed out the hollowness of Brown’s mantra ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ and Straw’s failure to deliver his ‘statement of British values’.⁴² The day before, the Union Jack had been seen (accidentally, if symbolically) flying upside down when Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson signed a trade deal with China – the inverted flag is a sign of distress or a calculated insult.⁴³

* * *

As an image, the Union Jack saturates British and international culture – it is a design classic and a fashion icon; as a political symbol, however, it hangs over New Labour like a nightmare. Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson had piggy-backed on Britop's Mod revivalism in 1997, Mandelson smugly announcing, 'together, we have reclaimed the flag' – but this was simply brass-necked political opportunism to get the fans of Oasis and the Spice Girls on message.⁴⁴ For a decade the Union Jack was relegated to the back benches, but Brown brought it back to the political centre-stage as a keynote of, presumably, Brown-ism. But in the meantime New Labour had neither addressed the English Question nor succeeded in re-integrating the four nations into a new understanding of Britishness. Shortly before Brown took office (April 2007), a poll recorded that 52% of Scots claimed that they would support moves to dissolve the Union⁴⁵; a year later, for all of Brown's flag-waving, concern was raised about the on-line 'national conversation' organized by the SNP.⁴⁶ Gordon Banks (Labour MP for Ochil and South Perthshire) noted 'comments about burning the Union Jack and about Union liars, as well as comments that could incite hatred and divide people, such as those about Asians, Swedish, Danish, Belgian, Norwegian and English business men owning land in Scotland': he called on the SNP to dissociate itself from this process.⁴⁷

In such contexts, generated in part by the Brown-Straw-Goldsmith initiative, the flag has become a sign of conflict rather than of cohesion. The past five years have focused less on the Union Jack as an adaptation, a compromise, a history, and a map, and more on the flag as a fragmented, fashionably deconstructed design, a political football, or a scapegoat. This current perception is a reminder of the fragility of the Union, and the risk of it falling apart: in its thirteen or so pieces this flag is a fitting symbol, one might say, of broken Britain. And the more the Union Jack is seen as contested and perceived as a representation of conflict, the more a rhetoric of crisis will inform political speech and the identity of Great Britain.

Notes

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4074801.stm>

² Incidentally, I call the flag the Union Jack, as it has popularly been known by that name since the seventeenth century and I do not confine my attentions to the 'Union Flag' as it is defined by maritime law.

³ This paper was recorded on UCDScholarcast on April 15th 2010.

⁴ David Blunkett, *A New England: An English Identity within Britain* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005), 7.

⁵ See Telegraph online 6 July 2007.

⁶ <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7170/7170.pdf> (pp 58)

⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1556637/Gordon-Brown-flies-Union-flag-all-year-long.html>

⁸ *Hansard* (1933), cclxxix, 1324.

⁹ See Nick Groom, *The Union Jack: The Story of the British Flag* (London: Atlantic, 2006), 272.

¹⁰ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3602772.ece> [*Sunday Times* 23 March 2008]

- ¹¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/article3603178.ece> [*Sunday Times*, 23 March 2008]
- ¹² Following based on Groom, 291-4.
- ¹³ Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940-2000* (Macmillan, 2002), 281.
- ¹⁴ Weight, 283, 284.
- ¹⁵ Groom, 294.
- ¹⁶ Hansard: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm071126/debtext/71126-0016.htm>
- ¹⁷ http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ian_lucas/2007/11/enter_the_dragon.html [*Guardian*, 27 Nov 2007]. The cross of St David is a gold cross on black.
- ¹⁸ Telegraph on-line 5 Dec 2007: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3644508/Vote-for-your-favourite-Union-flag.html>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/apr/23/politicalnews.britishidentity> [*Guardian* April 23 2008]. Downing Street said that, in accordance with protocol, the union flag would fly on the 'superior' pole, deemed to be the one closest to Buckingham Palace.
- ²⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6258089.stm
- ²¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3529554.ece> [*The Times*, 11 March 2008]
- ²² <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3528245.ece> [*Times Online*, 11 March 2008]
- ²³ Telegraph online 27 October 2008.
- ²⁴ http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article3482980.ece [*The Times* 5 March 2008]
- ²⁵ http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article3484505.ece [*The Times* 5 March 2008]
- ²⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/jul/08/uk.labour1>;
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/jul/08/uk.labour>
- ²⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4611682.stm
- ²⁸ Charles Howard (1536 – 14 Dec 1624; second Baron Howard of Effingham) was the Earl of Nottingham (fifth creation) under Elizabeth and James. He was appointed in 1596, at the same time being made Lord Lieutenant of England: see *ODNB* (which doesn't however mention the flag).
- ²⁹ <http://www.newstatesman.com/200605080041>
- ³⁰ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius', in *Down and Out in Paris and London, The Road to Wigan Pier, Homage to Catalonia, Essays and Journalism* [single volume] (Secker and Warburg, 1981), 541; see also 540.
- ³¹ *Guardian* G2 (28 November 2009), 3.
- ³² *Times* 2 (3 June 2009), 8: goes on to say, interestingly, 'Italians of my generation grew up loving the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack, but at some point the Stars and Stripes became politically tainted.'
- ³³ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3602772.ece>
- ³⁴ *Hansard* (1805), 365. See Orwell, 533.
- ³⁵ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030307/debtext/30307-21.htm>
- ³⁶ While legislation (1968 and 1990) make it an offence to falsely label food, 'neither Act defines how much British involvement is required before produce can be sold as British', and the specific phrase 'country of origin' is not defined in subsequent legislation (1996).
- ³⁷ 29 October 2008:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081029/debtext/81029-0004.htm>. There has also been an Early Day Motion proposed on branding Department for International Development (DFID) with the Union Jack (Daniel Kawczynski, 24 March 2009):
<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=38304&SESSION=899>
- ³⁸ Ten Minute Rule, SO No 23: see <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/unionflag.html>
- ³⁹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080205/debtext/80205-0004.htm>
- ⁴⁰ Reply to a written question from Tory MP Andrew Rosindell.
- ⁴¹ Telegraph online 27 October 2008.
- ⁴² *Guardian* online 4 Feb 2009.
- ⁴³ Telegraph online 3 Feb 2009. For a school webpage on flag flown upside down, see <http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/geography/flag/index.html>
- ⁴⁴ Kevin Davey, *English Imaginaries: Six Studies in Anglo-British Modernity* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), 11.

⁴⁵ The Week (28 April 2007), 13.

⁴⁶ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/a-national-conversation/Tell-us/Blog>

⁴⁷ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080402/halltext/80402h0007.htm>