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Northern Nationalism and Genealogies of Disadvantage



Alnwick Castle was built in the wake of the Norman Conquest and is still the seat of the Duke of Northumberland, a Landowner with an estimated wealth of £315 million, whose lands are tilled by 100 tenant farmers. Image © Sue Burton Photography Ltd / Shutterstock.com.

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The post-Election [petition](https://www.change.org/p/the-uk-government-allow-the-north-of-england-to-secede-from-the-uk-and-join-scotland) (<https://www.change.org/p/the-uk-government-allow-the-north-of-england-to-secede-from-the-uk-and-join-scotland>) to allow the North of England to secede from the UK and join a 'New Scotland' highlights the deep alienation of the North from the centre of power in London, but also the problematic nature of Englishness and 'English' interests propounded by UKIP and The Conservative Party. In effect, some in the North struggle to identify with a country (England) surrounding a supposed nation (the English) with which they are identified by the UK state, but which they increasingly see as less viable than a potential independent state (Scotland) surrounding a supposed nation (the Scots) with which they do not centrally identify.

Over the past three years, confusion about identification with nations and states has been examined in a [participatory project](http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/) (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/>) involving people from a range of backgrounds in two groups which are increasingly alienated from their respective states: people from Ashington, Northumberland, which has seen its traditional source of livelihood decline in the wake of the dissolution of the mining industry, and people from Aboriginal Australian communities around Brisbane, which have seen their traditional lives destroyed during colonialism. The project has involved the groups acting as small-scale political and diplomatic entities while embedded in each other's communities over the course of month-long visits.

As several of the Ashingtonians noted, England, increasingly identified as London and the Home Counties, feels much further away to them than Scotland. Northumberland, the 'Border County', feels as much a buffer to the South as it does the North. Do people here really share more with bankers in The City than they do with their peers across the border? For many, the border between Scotland and England has always been tenuous, demonstrated by the straddling of [genetic pools](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v519/n7543/full/nature14230.html#access) (<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v519/n7543/full/nature14230.html#access>) and the Northumbrian origins of Scots dialect. None of this is to advance a new nationalism, but it should give us every reason to challenge banal notions of Englishness, especially when we consider the contextual nature of the development of national identity in the UK.

Votes for UKIP in the General Election may suggest the opposite. However, these have to be understood, not in the context of a blossoming of Englishness, but increasing awareness of the alienation of citizens from state. The resistance to immigration in the region is present as elsewhere, but that is often borne of the fear that the value and benefits of citizenship are being further undermined as limited resources are spread more ever thinner. The dissolution of nationalized industries and the more supportive features of the welfare system leave people confounded by the often incorrectly perceived support given to those who have even more tenuous claims to identification with the state (migrants) and the emboldened claims of nation-builders in Scotland. A brittle, reactive identity of that sort is hardly the bedrock of a cohesive and long-term form of affiliation with a nation or state. Indeed, for all those who are drawn into a UKIP account of something approaching a national identity, there are just as many who are openly questioning their future in England on account of increasing awareness of the fraught nature of historical [Englishness](#) (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/143731/matthew-johnson/empire-at-sunset>).

In an era in which actions are evaluated according to the extent to which they are materially rewarded, there is increasing concern in communities like Ashington for the deep historical relationships between their ancestors and landowners and industrialists who provided low levels of remuneration and recognition for difficult labour in dangerous and unforgiving conditions. People increasingly feel that the traditional notion that hard work brings natural rewards has been proven wrong and has been deployed to undermine the interests of those providing labour. There is growing recognition among disadvantaged people in these areas that they are disadvantaged not despite, but because, they worked hard and did not, or were unable to, secure other forms of employment.

While many have bought into the notion perpetuated by Government that disadvantage is simply the consequence of fecklessness, laziness and selfishness, people engaged in the project began to explore narratives of disadvantage which traced their position in the present to their ancestors' position in the past. While the cultural subjugation of people in recently colonized countries, such as the Aboriginal Australian group, is apparent and its legacies obvious, the genealogy of disadvantage faced by people in Ashington and elsewhere in England is less well-known.

While the various invasions and dispossessions in England, along with the 'Harrying of the North' by the Normans in the 11th century, may rightly seem ancient, it is worth bearing in mind the sobering fact that much of the UK remains owned by the [descendants of Norman invaders](#) (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/17/high-house-prices-inequality-normans>). If you are viewed as a 'pleb' in the UK, it is more than likely that your ancestors did not [do well out of feudalism](#) (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/apr/03/social-mobility-britain-aristocracy>) and its successor systems. They were often discriminated against in a range of forms, first being tied to servitude in a particular place, then forced to move in search of employment during the industrial revolution due to its 'liberating' need for free labour.

The recent issue of ['accentism'](#) (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/14/do-accent-matter-modern-britain>) illustrates the cultural legacy of this deep history powerfully, with regional forms of English rejected as aberrations or perversions of English. The fact that they are actually closer to older Anglo-Saxon forms than supposedly 'pure' Received Pronunciation (RP) highlights the way in which the Norman Conquest, in particular, helped to shape future conceptions of Englishness in counter-intuitive ways. In the wake of the Conquest, speaking English dialects or the Celtic languages signified the speaker's status as a conquered, subject and dependent person.

There is a reason why Anglo-Saxon names for meats were replaced by Norman ones, while Anglo-Saxon names for farm animals remain – dialect speakers raised the animals, while the Norman elite and its descendants ate the meat. As the Norman descendants lost their once primary lands in France, they carved and monopolized a distinctive, elite English identity, in which elites embodied a form of Englishness derived in part from their overseas origins, and those in the regions were accepted as aberrant English in return for their hard work, service and loyalty. The shame that some people feel about their dialect or, more commonly today, accent, is derived from the way in which it exposes the speaker's disadvantaged status. My father, for example, attempted to eradicate visible and audible traces of his deep history and refused to call himself 'poor', despite the fact that he had no money. Altering speech and viewing his financial status as a temporary aberration meant that he could avoid stigmatizing himself with a transgenerational, aberrant and dependent status.

In effect, then, not only are the effects of regional differences masked by those on the right as a response to migration and Scottish nationalism, they have also been deployed, often by those same forces, to stigmatize and disadvantage people in the regions. Now that the compensation of stable employment for being a disadvantaged person has been removed, there remain few 'rational' reasons to identify with England and its representatives in Westminster. In this context, it remains to be seen whether anyone can foster 'irrational', emotional ties with England and Englishness.

This article is part of '[A Cross-Cultural Working Group on "Good Culture" and Precariousness](#)' (<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/>), a collaborative project between academics and non-academic community co-researchers in Ashington, Northumberland, and Aboriginal communities around Brisbane, South East Queensland, aimed at identifying and fostering cultural responses to precariousness capable of promoting wellbeing.

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