

A jigsaw state

Mark Perryman

Most *Observer* readers would probably feel a little uncomfortable holding up bits of paper to form a flag of St George at a gig.

Kitty Empire, *Observer*¹

Billy Bragg opened the second half of his 2008 St George's Day celebration at London's Barbican theatre with *Jerusalem*. And, as Kitty Empire put it in her review, the audience responded 'coily' when Billy invited them to join in by holding above their heads the carefully laid out sheets of red and white paper distributed on the auditorium's seats to form one huge St George Cross. Hardly an exercise of Leni Riefenstahl proportions, but more than enough, apparently, to get *Observer* readers searching for any excuse not to join in.

Billy has made it his one-man mission to dismantle those kinds of reservations. But Kitty is probably right that at the Barbican, even amongst his most loyal fans, Billy still has a case to make before they'll be wrapping their mostly liberal values and sometime socialist convictions in St George.

Two years earlier Billy was headlining a 'Hope not Hate' tour when it reached Barking on Mayday. This was where Billy grew up, and the town was soon to be made infamous for electing an unprecedented thirteen British National Party (BNP) councillors. Billy was flying his St George Cross that night too, full of anger at what the BNP were about to achieve:

This belongs to every single one of us. We're going to see so many of these this summer. And they are all going to be waved in support of a multicultural football team that represents our country. When I see Shane McGowan bring his Irish Tricolour on stage when he does his Pogues gigs I see how proud he is of that flag. Well I'm proud of this flag and I'm not going to let any racist, fascist take it away from me.²

It's the standard default mechanism of those who don't want the Far Right to own Englishness. If our lot can take the flag off them then they can't have it. But that's hardly enough any more. Britain is breaking up: the Union Jack is being triangulated by the pulling power of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and a slow but sure drifting away of Northern Ireland too. It's no longer sufficient to 'reclaim' the St George Cross flag: in a disunited Kingdom it has to mean something too.

Joining Billy at the Barbican were North London rockabillics Kitty, Daisy and Lewis, mixing an affection for 1950s rock 'n' roll with the occasional blast of tuneful ska. 'What's Honolulu got to do with St George's Day?', a not so right-on heckler shouts from the back of the theatre, as the band mix some Hawaiian rhythms in with the rock 'n' roll. The young musicians look a tad confused and just plough on regardless, while the audience shift awkwardly in their seats, perhaps feeling a little guilty for thinking the same though not having the balls to shout out quite so loudly and rudely. But that's the tasty thing about Englishness at its best, it's all mixed up with a myriad of influences that turn any search for the purity of its essence into a futile and thankless task. How can post-war England be divorced from the influence of Americana? And inner-city England is irrevocably black, and in large parts of our urban nation increasingly Muslim too. We eat, dance, wear this nationhood of difference, or we retreat into the redoubt of wishing none of it had ever washed up on our shores.

Tom Clarke of indie-rockers The Enemy provided punch-in-the-air choruses that went down well with the crowd, even if most of them were old enough to think they'd heard it all before. The Enemy's anthemic 'We'll Live and Die in These Towns' is a plea to be listened to that's been heard down the generations, as each produces music to provide an aural escape-route from the dead-end economy of deindustrialised late capitalism – a plight made worse, much worse, by the recession that was to follow in autumn 2008.

Completing the St George's Day line-up were 2007 Mercury Prize nominees Rachel Unthank and the Winterset. Their sound is bawdy, rasping vocals backed by a sparse arrangement of piano, fiddle and accordion, with a bit of clog dancing thrown in. They are unmistakably from some place well beyond the multicultural metropolis, Northumberland. But theirs is no reductionist version of folk. They're not interested in cultural purity. Instead there's a touch of the Celtic ceilidh to their rhythm and dance, while the shadowy soundscape they weave could easily pass itself off for a dance number produced by elec-

tronica, rather than their more traditional instrumentation. It's a curious combination that is attractively different and new, thanks to its connection to origins in some faraway oral tradition of the song and the festive that the English aren't very good at owning up to as theirs.

The night closes with one of those cultural contradictions that leave us wondering what on earth this Englishness is all about. Billy orchestrates an ensemble performance of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, a spiritual from the black American deep south, whose previous life on these shores has included a version with unprintably obscene lyrics drunkenly sung in the showers after a rugby match; in the 2003 Rugby World Cup Final, when Jonny Wilkinson put that last minute drop goal over, it was cleaned up to become an overnight alternative national anthem. It's this kind of mixed-up version of Englishness that Billy is celebrating, a collision of origins and circumstance; or, as Kitty Empire concluded in her review, 'Bragg's vision of Englishness is muddled in part because Englishness itself is a muddle'.³

THE BEST PART OF BREAKING UP

This muddle England finds itself in is a result of three key factors that have been crucial to defining the past decade. First, devolution has delivered for Scotland a Parliament, for Wales a National Assembly, and for Northern Ireland a large measure of self-government. These institutions have varying powers and degrees of popular support, but each has most of the markings of a parliament of sorts, and in all three countries, their respective nationalist parties form either the governing majority or part of a governing coalition. And this process is to all intents and purposes irreversible. No mainstream party seeks to reverse devolution.

Second, immigration and migrant labour has unsettled formerly homogeneous versions of Britishness in general, but of Englishness in particular. Gary Younge has expertly pinpointed this difference: 'The apparently seamless link between Englishness and whiteness has been broken. Even though nobody would question that England is, and most likely always will be, predominantly white, it remains almost impossible to imagine it without black and Asian people as part of it.'⁴ Though some would certainly prefer to imagine England in precisely that way, most don't, and this popular majority is constructed out of an everyday, mainly urban, experience of multiculturalism. It's an advance which has limitations, and remains tentative and fragile, but nevertheless it has evolved into a key feature of modern Englishness. The same

cannot be claimed, at least in simple demographic terms, of Scottishness and Welshness: 'The black experience is now intimately interwoven into the fabric of English daily life in a way that is not so obviously the case in Scotland and Wales.'⁵

Third, globalisation, and more acutely europeanisation, has ceded the powers of the British state from its familiar locus, Westminster. This has generated a deep sense of alienation from the body politic. In the late 1980s 'globalisation' first emerged as a buzzword to describe the social, economic and political impact of a transnational model of capitalism which some characterised as 'new times'.⁶ The effects of globalisation on our sense of place and identity have been contested, but there is no doubt that they have transformed the way we feel about place and belonging.

Amongst the writers describing the changes underway, David Held was one who asserted that this demanded 'a politics beyond the sovereign nation-state'.⁷ Along with his co-thinkers Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, David Held forecasts that a hyper-globalism will define the future of politics. Ulrich Beck describes the decline of the nation-state as 'a decline of the specifically national content of the state and an opportunity to create a cosmopolitan state system'.⁸ He looks forward to a moment 'for politics to take a quantum leap from the nation-state system to the cosmopolitan state system'.⁹ And in an article co-written with Anthony Giddens, Beck described a system of international relations where 'formal sovereignty can be exchanged for real power'.¹⁰ This all sounds breathtakingly forward-looking. But how does it explain the upsurge in support for Scottish and Welsh nationalism? The hugely popular waving and wearing of England's St George? Not to mention the nationalist impulse across Europe, sometimes civic, sometimes not, in the aftermath of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall? Yes, those states almost all joined a scramble to apply for membership of the EU, but they did so as nation-states not as anonymous adjuncts to the European idea.

The clear implication of the hyper-globalisers is that any such tendencies are backward-looking, incapable of embracing the bright, shiny cosmopolitan spirit of the age. But theirs is only one interpretation of how globalisation shapes politics. At the same time that David Held was becoming certain that the nation-state was approaching its end, geographer Doreen Massey was providing a slightly different emphasis to the new times: 'A sense of place ... can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place

would recognise that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local.¹¹ Such a sense easily co-exists with formations of civic nationalism that are spearheading the Scottish and Welsh breaking-up of the Union. And it could contribute to the foundation of the new nation-states that this politics demands – which the hyper-globalisers disavow as a thing of the past.

REBEL SONGS

Originally published in 1977, Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain* remains a key text for understanding the radical potential for four nations after a union.¹² While Nairn recognises that any break-up will be subject to the uneven development of nationalist politics in each of these nations, much of his focus inevitably settles on Scotland. After all, the bulk of the book originally appeared in 1974, in the immediate aftermath of Margo MacDonald's stunning SNP by-election victory deep in Labour's Glaswegian heartland, Govan.

Margo's victory proved to be not much more than totemic: the long march to devolution was to take another two decades and more. But Nairn's thesis remains both prescient, and crucial to understanding how England might catch up with Scottish, Welsh and Irish contributions towards a break-up. In the mid 1970s Nairn identified a phenomenon that the English themselves had perhaps hardly noticed, precisely because of their muddle over the nature of Englishness. Nairn's answer to the question of what constituted Englishness was almost nothing. And what counted as British? Everything else.

Nairn argued that 'the deformation of Englishness by her state-history has generated a late but unmistakable variety of left-nationalist popular culture'.¹³ Who on earth can he have been thinking of? The Beatles, the Kinks? Perhaps the poetry of Adrian Mitchell or Christopher Logue, maybe the art of Peter Blake and Bridget Riley? Or the experimental theatre produced by Ken Campbell and Caryl Churchill? The films of Ken Loach and Michael Powell? Possibly the surreal comedy of Dud and Pete, or Monty Python's Flying Circus? This isn't a culture that is often dubbed 'English'. Nor is it a group of artists that can in all seriousness be labelled 'left-nationalist'. But the Englishness of their work is part of its content, and it has helped frame, however sub-consciously, English national identity ever since. Nairn himself admitted the awkwardness of ascribing a political content to the phenomenon that he was describing: 'this is a cultural nationalism

which has not yet come to consciousness of its own nature and purpose'. So far, so good. But where Tom went a tad haywire with his forecasting was in his prediction about where all this English popular culture – with a streak of post-1968 pop-socialism to spruce it up – might take us. He described these developments as 'the seed-bed of a national future being gestated by the decline of the old state-system every bit as much as Scottish or Welsh nationalism'.¹⁴ Seed-bed? Gestation? It has sometimes seemed in the three and a bit decades since Tom Nairn wrote those words that any such project has been weeded and dumped in the compost-bin of history, while the chances of dear old Blighty giving birth to anything like a progressive future are not too good either.

One of the peculiarities of Englishness is this denial of a national culture. Of course almost all cultures are derivative, drawing on a variety of sources. And the best have an appeal which is universalist, shaped by the breadth of their audience. There is a distinctly English contribution to punk, post-punk, two-tone ska, reggae and lovers rock, grime, jungle and raga, dance music, indie-rock, heavy metal, soul, rave and acid house. This isn't to ignore particular contributions to each from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but why should we not also affirm their Englishness?

The Jam and the Clash, Echo and the Bunnymen, the Smiths and Pulp, the Specials and Madness, Steel Pulse and Misty, Beth Orton, Asian Dub Foundation, So Solid Crew, Iron Maiden and Def Leppard, Lily Allen and Estelle, each have been framed by their locality, from Woking, Southall and West London to Handsworth, Salford and Sheffield. A music that comes out of a city in South Yorkshire or the West Midlands inevitably draws on influences outside of national boundaries. Some are the product of a diaspora – an English variety of Afro-Caribbean reggae or ska, an English version of South Asian bhangra.¹⁵ But however variegated the origins and influences there remains an almost outright refusal to own up to the Englishness of the music.

This is perhaps best summed up by early 1990s Britpop. In his superb chronicle of the era, *The Last Party*, John Harris details the major Britpop bands – Blur, Elastica, Oasis, Pulp, and Suede.¹⁶ And the seminal influence on them all of Paul Weller. John signposts the depth of the confusion revealed in a term like 'Britpop', however, by quite rightly sub-titling the book 'The Demise of *English* Rock'. The bands described were drawn from almost every major English city (and the musicians were almost all white, though other migrant cultures were

influential – Irishness in the case of Oasis). The music they produced was profoundly English, not British. In his introduction to the 2001 edition to *England's Dreaming*, music journalist Jon Savage details the mounting political contradiction, as well as the absences that it serves to obscure, of the so-called Britpop of Oasis and Blur:

The Union Jack-strewn Britpop did not reflect Britain's multicultural reality but highlighted, almost exclusively, white rock groups from the South East. So it wasn't Britpop – because dance music is mainstream pop – but Engrock. Yet this kind of unquestioning English superiority is under constitutional attack as never before.¹⁷

Aside from Jon's glaring omission of Northern England's Oasis and Pulp, his point still holds. As the case of Britpop clearly shows, a failure to address formations of English culture serves too often not only to ignore the contribution of black, Asian and migrant cultures but also to enforce an assumption that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland somehow don't count. The English Brits do the job and sod the rest.

But devolution has begun to bust apart this cultural conspiracy of a Greater Englishness masquerading as Britishness – a conspiracy often justified by liberal commentators as somehow justifiable on the basis of its supposed 'inclusiveness'. Go tell that to the Scots, Welsh and at least half of the Northern Irish too. In stark contrast to all this, Michael Bracewell was one of the first writers to detect the radical, unsettling, pluralist potential of coming to terms with England's role in this broken-up culture: 'As jungle stations send Respect to junglists whose identity is defined by little more than the names of towns – to Torquay, Carlisle, Ipswich, Wigan – there is the momentary sense, before that movement too becomes absorbed into the loop of cultural history, that England is being broadcast as an outlaw sonic sculpture.'¹⁸ Rebel songs from the land of Robin Hood, good-for-something banditry, just the thing to download on to your ipod and file under English.

OFF WITH HIS HEAD

The cultural commentator Patrick Wright warns against a theme-park version of English history which 'in polarising the past from the present can only produce a kippered idea of England in which the very thought of difference or change is instantly identified with degeneration, corruption and death'.¹⁹ There are plenty who seek just such a polari-

sation, contrasting a Golden Age Englishness with the ghastly mire they see all around them today. This is a view of the present that is founded on a fondness for former glories, via a representation which is racialised, deferential and classless. Patrick details the resulting political imperative: 'a grossly simplified narrative of old authenticity and new corruption that sends out its followers in search of scapegoats'.²⁰

A TV series in autumn 2008 gave a hint of a very different national narrative. Channel 4's *The Devil's Whore* told the tale of Roundheads vs Cavaliers in a way few had bothered with before. Broadcast period drama has covered the English Civil War plenty of times before, but always taking the side of the glamorous Cavaliers, with their flowing locks and silky tunics, at the expense of those unfashionably dull Roundheads. But *The Devil's Whore* was different. It recognised that the English Civil War wasn't simply a battle between two rival factions divided by their dress sense: this was the English Revolution. And as series co-creator Martine Brant points out, the fact that we accord this national moment scarcely any recognition is a useful indicator of the conservatism in our national culture: 'Why is there no public holiday on 30 January, the day when Parliament cut off Charles I's head?'.²¹

Somehow we have ended up in a place where we celebrate the execution of a bloke who wanted to blow up the Houses of Parliament, and entirely ignore the day when it was off with Charles's head – and all that was represented by his divine right to rule. Anyone who doubts the revolutionary ideals that were on the verge of turning the world upside down in 1649 should read the Putney Debates, when Oliver Cromwell's sell-out was exposed by those who had provided him with the military muscle to bring down the King of England. Leading the opposition to Cromwell was Colonel Thomas Rainborough: 'For really I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live, as the greatest he.'²²

In *The Devil's Whore* Thomas Rainborough was cast as dashing handsome: an articulate opponent to Cromwell's creeping tyranny, a fearless warrior for the Revolution, and pretty good in bed too. Peter Flannery, co-author of the series, pinpointed the failure of TV period drama to represent the Roundheads' point of view, and the broader cultural consequences of thinking of the English as anything but revolutionaries: 'It is absolutely extraordinary how the English have forgotten their revolution and how under-dramatised it has been. There has been nothing on television that actually tells it as it

happened. We killed a monarch, after all, and ours was the first revolution in Europe'.²³

This forgetfulness is all the more remarkable considering that one of the highpoints of English Marxism as an intellectual tradition was provided by its account of the Civil War.²⁴ Christopher Hill and others outlined an account of the significance of the period that was unrivalled in its potential to subvert the establishment version of history – Kings, Queens and all that. However, the connection between remaking English history and rethinking the political identity that constitutes Englishness was rarely made. Despite this extraordinary contribution to uncovering the hidden history of England's radical past, marxist politics retains a strong strand of antagonism towards the popular and progressive potential of almost any modern variant of English nationalism.²⁵ Twenty years after 1989, and the implosion of what little remained of English marxism's intellectual influence, this might not seem to matter very much any more. But for a moment, at least, it once might have done. *The Devil's Whore* served to remind us of the potency of challenging the establishment version of English history. And its challenge was all the more effective because its scholarliness – marxist or otherwise – was mixed with a form so vivid and popular, to remind us that ours was once a nation of Levellers who had executed a King and all he represented.

OVER THE BORDER

Scottish and Welsh nationalists are acutely aware of their own sense of historical mission and they manage to combine this with a model of civic nationalism that is primarily social-democratic in content. The combination provides the basis for what the Welsh writer Raymond Williams described as 'a re-connection inside the struggles of the sense of an objective that has the possibility of affirmation'.²⁶ Speaking at Plaid Cymru's 1977 summer school, Williams situated this emergent nationalism in the context of the stagnation of large parts of the post-war European left. If he was being a little pessimistic in the late 1970s, Williams's thesis was proved resoundingly correct two decades on with the wholesale defeat of what remained of a British left by new Labour. Williams looked forward to a progressive nationalism in Scotland and Wales that would recover the ideals and values that the 'British left' had proved largely incapable of reviving. Williams described this potential role for the nationalist parties as arising 'when we move from a merely

retrospective nationalist politics to a truly prospective politics'. Such a transition would reignite the transformative theory and practice that had largely gone missing on the left: 'However militant that politics may be it has lost something at its heart that is recognised, again and again, by those who are inside it: the sense of what the struggle would attain, what human life would be like, other than mere utopian rhetoric.'²⁷

In Wales devolution has seen a new generation of Plaid Cymru activists elected as Welsh Assembly Members, MPs at Westminster and Euro MEPs. They were against the war in Iraq and support solidarity with Gaza; they are opposed to university top-up tuition fees, anti-racist and green. They oppose PFI, and seek full public ownership of the banks rather than new Labour no strings bailouts. Plaid's One Wales coalition with Labour in the Welsh Assembly maintains pressure on an already semi detached Welsh Labour Party to keep its distance from all that new Labour has failed to achieve at Westminster. Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and Bethan Jenkins very much represent the Welsh left in the Welsh Assembly, while at Westminster Plaid MP Adam Price has been one of the government's most determined critics on the Iraq war.²⁸ In the European Parliament Plaid's Vice-President and MEP Jill Evans sits as a member of the parliament's Green group, and with them she campaigns against GM foods, opposes the expansion of nuclear power and argues for tough EU action on climate change.²⁹ Plaid's politics are not simply a rehash of an old fashioned social democracy: this is a nationalist politics profoundly influenced by protest and social movements too – especially environmentalism, the peace movement and feminism.

After the 2007 Scottish Parliament Elections, the SNP formed a minority government. Amongst the policies passed in their first year were: abolition of the graduate endowment (thus removing university tuition fees in any guise); the cutting of prescription charges as a first step towards their phased abolition; the introduction of free personal and nursing care for the elderly who cannot cope on their own at home; and opposition both to new nuclear power stations and Trident's replacement at Faslane. (Of course on the latter the Westminster Labour government proceeded regardless.) Allan Little described the transformation of the SNP that these and other policies represent: a party in the 1970s that was 'backward looking, heritage-based, fixated on an unpleasantly ethnic sense of what Scotland was ... as hostile to the European Community as it was to the British Union' has become, under Alex Salmond's leadership, a 'modern,

European social-democratic party, purged ... of the anti-English sentiment that so many Scots detested and feared'.³⁰ It is incontestably the case that both the SNP and Plaid Cymru are now situated closer to the left-of-centre than to the extremities of a nationalist right.

Politics in Northern Ireland differs from that in Scotland and Wales in at least two crucial respects. Firstly, from the late 1960s to the late 1990s Northern Irish political life was dominated by an armed conflict between Republican and Unionist paramilitaries and the British Army. Secondly, the Labour Party and Liberal-Democrats don't stand in Northern Irish elections, while the Tories sub-let their franchise out to the Ulster Unionist Party when it suits them. Nevertheless, since the Good Friday Agreement the similarities in political status with other parts of this disunited Kingdom are obvious. It is emblematic of Northern Irish politics, however, that devolved government is characterised as 'power-sharing' not so much with Westminster but between the parties of Unionism and Republicanism.

The majority party of Republicanism is now Sinn Féin, with 28 seats won and 26 per cent of the vote in the 2007 elections, compared to 16 seats and 15 per cent for the SDLP. Sinn Féin not only differs from the SNP and Plaid Cymru in having previously been allied to a paramilitary force; in addition, their ambition is not simply independence but unification with another sovereign state, the Republic of Ireland. Neither of these differences can be lightly dismissed, but in every other regard Sinn Féin's modern republicanism shares the left-of-centre politics of Scottish and Welsh nationalists. Against Brownite Labour PFIs, and the Dublin government's similar Public-Private Partnerships, and with the support of the SDLP, Sinn Féin Education Minister Catriona Ruane is determined to abolish the 11-plus; and Sinn Féin's detailed 2008 all-Ireland health care policy is based on the social-democratic tenets of care for all, free at the point of delivery, and funded from a redistributive tax system. The party's response to the 2008 draft budget summarises Sinn Féin's social-democratic complexion: 'At an overarching level, Sinn Féin believes that there must be a redistributive dynamic within the Executive's financial and political policies, which recognises that economic sovereignty, economic prosperity and economic equality are all inextricably linked.'³¹

None of these parties is simply social-democratic. Their politics remain organised around mixing independence, devolution and republicanism. But none separates those objectives from principles of social

justice, equality and an active state. The 'British left' struggles to recognise this new plurality of forces. The otherwise thoughtful Compass group is typical of the difficulties that the social-democratic left in England experiences in acknowledging the newly plural left emerging in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.³² The Compass document *How to Live in the Twenty-First Century* is sub-titled 'Britain's future and the case for real change', but there is not one paragraph, sentence or even a passing word which recognises that for the past ten years 'Britain' has been in a process of devolution; and that for significant parts of the left outside England 'Britain' as an institution doesn't have a future, and indeed is an obstacle to the 'real change' the document seeks.³³ This inability to recognise the plurality of left-of-centre parties is symptomatic of the greater Englishness that masquerades as Britishness on the left as much as on the right. Of course many on the left in Scotland and Wales will continue to organise in and around the Labour Party, but many don't, and find a home instead in the SNP and Plaid. The state that has defined the political identity of the left is starting to fracture, and this poses a very real difficulty for those so immersed in that identity that they cannot recognise the progressive responses to the break-up in the name of nationalism.

ANOTHER SCOTLAND WAS POSSIBLE

Labourism, soft and hard, old and new, has produced a unionist British left. It is the space opened up by the embedded social-democratic values of Welsh and Scottish nationalism that indicates the possibilities towards a plural left for a broken-up Britain.

In Wales some of this space has been occupied by Blaenau Gwent People's Voice.³⁴ In the 2005 general election Labour Assembly Member Peter Law overturned a 19,000 Labour majority to win the parliamentary seat against his former party. He had stood in opposition to the imposition by Labour of an all-women shortlist, which many had felt to be a subterfuge to ensure the selection of a Labour loyalist candidate. People's Voice retained both the parliamentary seat and the Assembly Seat a year later, after Law's tragic death from cancer, and in 2007 five of the party's candidates were elected to the County Borough Council. This represents a significant, if local, breakthrough, representing a Welsh socialist tradition in the image of the constituency's former MP Aneurin Bevan (rather than the Marxism of the South Wales mining valleys' former 'Little Moscows').³⁵ People's Voice does

not particularly identify with the social movement politics that have influenced Plaid Cymru's decentralist socialism, but this working-class community politics clearly has an appeal. John Harris has described People's Voice as 'the Labour Party in exile'.³⁶ These are people who felt their party had been taken away from them. They are taking at least some of it back; and the national dimension – opposition to a politics that is dictated from Westminster and disloyal to the Welsh socialist tradition, that is uninterested in their Welsh way of doing things – is at the core of this. This localised politics was partly made possible by devolution. Left politics with a local flavour is able to flourish in these conditions, as well as nationalist politics with a left flavour.

Scotland's East End, Clydeside in particular, possesses a socialist tradition every bit as radical as the South Wales mining valleys. That tradition helped produce the Communist Party's biggest electoral success in the 1945 general election, when two Communist MPs were elected. Tommy Sheridan's SSP in many ways carried on this tradition.

Tommy Sheridan came to prominence in Scottish politics as a young, charismatic leader of anti-poll tax campaigning in the late 1980s. He built anti-poll tax unions on Glasgow's housing schemes – places where the Labour Party hadn't organised in decades. The politics was a touch dour, but it earned the respect and involvement of disconnected communities who'd had their fill of arms-length Labour politicians, and weren't going to be impressed by the usual student revolutionaries of the far left either. A former member of Militant who had been expelled from the Labour Party, Sheridan now found himself leading a new party, Scottish Militant Labour. Imprisoned because of his anti-poll tax activities, he stood for election to Glasgow City Council from his cell, and won. And in a series of campaigns Scottish Militant Labour won more seats, securing a small but significant electoral base.³⁷

This might have remained a localised group. But devolution and the very obvious shift of the SNP leftwards – with Blair's turn of the Labour Party in the opposite direction – convinced Sheridan that there was the potential to form a Scottish Socialist Party, to attract both left nationalists and disaffected Labour members. Incredibly, in the first elections to the new Scottish Parliament Tommy Sheridan won a seat. Overnight the street corner rabble rouser became the media face of what was to become a mounting disillusion with Labour. Sheridan was determined to make maximum use of this opportunity to build his party right across Scotland as an effective left opposition.

It was an ambitious plan but four years later, in the next round of elections to the Scottish Parliament, six Scottish Socialist MSPs were elected, four of them women. And the SSP broke out of its Glasgow stronghold too, winning seats on the regional lists in Lothians, South of Scotland, Central Scotland and West Scotland. The party had benefited from two key factors. First, there was disillusion with new Labour, particularly after the start of the war in Iraq. Second, there was John Swinney's leadership of the SNP, which largely ignored the potential appeal of voting SNP to left-wing voters and concentrated on the traditional SNP case of constitutional nationalism.

The SSP continued the Scottish Militant Labour practice of concentrating on community-level organisation, with a focus on the estates and an old-fashioned class politics that was infused by the disconnection – forced by a professionalised political class – between Labour and the communities it had once represented and been a vibrant part of. The SSP response to this crisis in working-class representation took the form of a left nationalism, though, significantly, it never actually described its politics as such. The SSP was rooted in the institutional and cultural specificities of Scottish politics, was publicly committed to Scottish independence, and was organisationally independent of the British left. It argued that: 'For those fighting back against capitalism, the disintegration of the United Kingdom should be a cause for celebration rather than mourning.'³⁸ The party was also influenced by extra-parliamentary social and protest movements – feminism in particular, but also by direct action campaigns against the M77 and M74 motorway extensions, and the blockades of Faslane. These introduced a fundamental challenge to the traditional way leftist parties organise, but in the end they were insufficient as the basis for its transformation. The SSP tended to retreat into ways of organising it was most familiar with, failing to develop a distinct political identity beyond the leadership of Tommy Sheridan, which left it vulnerable to being outmanoeuvred by a resurgent SNP. Kevin Williamson blamed this failure on a left political culture that had not adapted to the party's new role:

The culture within the SSP was one inherited from the old Marxist groupings who helped form the party. It is a tired and formulaic culture of regular branch meetings, street stalls, paper sales, and occasional public meetings that has its roots in the nineteenth century, and which is alien and off-putting to most people who come into contact with it.³⁹

Although the Tommy Sheridan's court battle with the *News of the World*, and its aftermath, did little for the SSP, it would in any case almost certainly have lost seats in the 2007 elections because of the SNP's resurgence under Alex Salmond, and Labour's left tack in response. Other small parties lost seats they had earlier gained: the Greens lost five of their seven seats, and of four previously successful independents only Margo MacDonald survived. A united SSP would have still been a potent force, however, well-placed to grow after the impact of the 2008 recession on the Scottish economy and politics. But instead the promise it represented was wasted.

The SSP's origins were in Scotland's anti-poll tax movement, and from this came both its potential and limitations. Though the SSP was more successful than any comparable outside left party since 1945, its eventual downfall proved the essence of a wider critique made by Beatrix Campbell of protest politics, written in the aftermath of the 1990 Trafalgar Square anti-poll-tax riots. Campbell argued that protest movements need to learn how to cope with conflicts of interest rather than suppressing them.⁴⁰ Charismatic leaders, however talented and personable, are a short cut, and will only succeed with the project they personify if they empower such a strategy. The fallout with Tommy Sheridan was a symptom rather than the essential cause of the SSP's downfall, which came about not because the Scottish electorate wasn't ready and willing to vote for a left nationalist party, but because of the lack of 'a culture of co-operation instead of control, and diversity instead of domination'.⁴¹ Without that at the SSP's core, it was doomed to be susceptible to just the kind of bust-up that ensued.

A COLOUR-CODED DEBATE

Two thousand years this little tiny fucking island has been raped and pillaged by people who have come here and wanted a piece of it. Two fucking world wars men have laid down their lives for this. And for what? So we can stick our fucking flag in the ground and say yes this is England and this is England and this is England. And for what? What for? So we can just open the fucking floodgates and let them all come in. Yes come on, come in get off your ship, did you have a safe journey? Was it hard? Here's a corner why don't you build yourself a shop.

Combo, *This is England*⁴²

In Scotland and Wales there are no parties of any significance offering an extreme right-wing version of Welsh or Scottish nationalism. But anxieties about English nationalism focus on support for the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Far Right British National Party (BNP). The political spectrum in England is currently on the verge of for the first time featuring permanently an electable party of the Far Right. Nick Lowles, editor of the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*, argues that a successful BNP would threaten 'a fundamental shift in British politics': 'the real fear is that we are heading the way of so many other European countries where large segments of the working class have broken with their traditional centre-left parties and moved to the right'. Nick cites England's crisis in working-class representation as a core factor: 'The BNP is tapping into political alienation and economic deprivation. It is providing a voice for those who increasingly feel ignored and cast aside by Labour. The BNP is articulating their concerns, grievances and even prejudices.'⁴³

The central objective of any emergent English left must be to detach a revived Englishness from the racialised dynamic the far right would seek to impose on it. Billy Bragg argues that a wedge can be driven between the racists and a progressive patriotism via a politics founded on the practical idea that 'Englishness has more to do with space than race'.⁴⁴ Environmentalist and anti-globalisation campaigner Paul Kingsnorth shares Billy's idea, urging 'a new type of patriotism, benign and positive, based on place not race, geography not biology'.⁴⁵ Paul identifies such a patriotism in campaigns against clone towns, the takeover of the high street by multinational brands, and the elimination of local farms, breweries, sub-post offices and traditional industries. He describes such developments as 'the bleaching out of character, community, place and meaning in the name of growth, investment and global competitiveness'.⁴⁶ His is a project full of radical potential, yet if it is unattached to an anti-racist politics it runs the risk of unwittingly reinforcing the racialisation of Englishness.

In celebrating England as a space not a race, in defending locality and tradition against a rapaciously homogenising global corporate greed, there is a responsibility to account for inclusions and exclusions. Why are Wimbledon and Henley almost exclusively white, while our football and cricket teams are such a mix of races? When the Last Night of the Proms belts out 'Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free', who did that land belong to so that 'thine Empire shall be strong'? How do we prevent the memory of the village pub, Sunday roast with meat

and two veg produced by the farm down the road, washed down with a local ale, becoming nostalgia for an English golden age, which was also only white?

In January 2009 these questions took on what appeared a toxic complexion when there were supposed 'anti-foreigner' wildcat strikes at construction sites across England. The original dispute was centred on the Lindsey Oil Refinery in North Lincolnshire, and the issue of cheap Italian labour imported to undercut local workers. What rankled leftists was the appearance of 'British Jobs for British Workers' banners and Union Jacks on the picket lines, closely followed by BNP activists handing out leaflets and seeking the strikers' support. In many cases the strikers had added 'Gordon Brown you said it' to their British Jobs for British Workers placards, reminding the prime minister of his oafish lauding of Britishness at his inaugural Labour Party conference as PM in 2007 – words he said in front of a huge Union Jack as a backdrop, just in case viewers might miss the message. It is not to romanticise some of the strikers' opinions to read their message as putting a rude two fingers up to politicians who promise what they know full well they cannot deliver, and never mind the consequences.

The BNP were there to win votes: that's what political parties, however loathsome, do. Two months previously the BNP had won their first seat on nearby Boston's town council. But if every time the BNP show up to exploit an issue the left retreats, fearing this must mean the subject is untouchable, then we vacate these issues for the racists to exploit for their own ends. Labour MP Jon Cruddas was clear about the causes of the dispute: 'We are a country that has been ransacked by the free flow of capital. The strikes are not about xenophobia, they're about large corporations and free markets that are out of control.'⁴⁷ Corporate globalisation will spark a resistance that will inevitably at least in part pit the defence of the local against the global. These strikes were part and parcel of this, and 'British Jobs for British Workers' was a more dramatic way of demanding 'local jobs for local workers'. Would this slogan – minus the Union Jacks – have made the strikers more or less palatable to leftist critics?

North Lincolnshire, according to the 2001 census, is 98 per cent White British: those local jobs would be going to a white working class thrown on the scrapheap by deindustrialisation. As the furor over Lindsey mounted, attention was also drawn to construction jobs on the 2012 Olympics site. At the time just 3 per cent of these jobs had gone to local people from the neighbouring London Borough of Tower

Hamlets – 90 jobs out of 3000. According to the same 2001 census, Tower Hamlets has a 43 per cent White British population, while 33 per cent come from a Bangladeshi background, and 6 per cent Afro-Caribbean. In this very different context what would the demand ‘local jobs for local workers’ mean? The answer lies in linking defence of the local to universalised values. This is a connection that neither the racial nationalists of the BNP nor new Labour advocates of deregulation want to make. But it reveals the potential for what Seumas Milne described as ‘a battle for jobs in a deepening recession and a backlash against the deregulated, race-to-the-bottom neoliberal model backed by new Labour for a decade’.⁴⁸

After the 1982 Falklands War, when a rampant, rightward-leaning patriotism threatened to engulf England’s body politic, Eric Hobsbawm identified the roots of its appeal: ‘It acts as a sort of compensation for the feelings of decline, demoralisation and inferiority. This is intensified by economic crisis.’⁴⁹ These are precisely the emotions which ignited the construction worker protests, and likewise the defence of a ‘real England’ that Paul Kingsnorth chronicles. Such emotions clearly have the prospect of heading off in a reactionary direction, mixing localism with racism along the way. But this need not necessarily be so. Also writing in the aftermath of the Falklands War, Stuart Hall pointed to the contestation that is required if a progressive patriotism is to emerge: ‘The traces of ancient, stone-age ideas cannot be expunged. But neither is their influence and infection permanent and immutable. The culture of an old empire is an imperialist culture: but that is not all it is. Imperialism lives on – but it is not printed in an English gene.’⁵⁰ With such a recognition of the contestable nature of Englishness, combined with linking the local to the universal, the remaking of England’s national identity could begin on a much more hopeful basis than some assume.

LEAVING ENGLAND BEHIND

In his original thesis on Britain’s Break-Up Tom Nairn offered no definitive timescale. He was nevertheless certain that an end of sorts was on its way: ‘There is no doubt that the old British state is going down. But, so far at least, it has been a slow foundering rather than the *Titanic*-type disaster so often predicted. And in the 1970s it has begun to assume a form which practically no one foresaw.’⁵¹ Nairn’s hope was that in England there would be a radical left breakthrough, one which

fundamentally challenged our archaic state and deferential class system. This, Nairn suggested, would be a natural ally of nationalist parties pushing for independence, and the result would be Britain's transformation into a modern, European multi-national state. Wary of any of this suggesting an intellectual optimism that was obscuring the pessimism of the will of those around him, Nairn also indicated another possible outcome: 'If a progressive "second revolution" still does not take place in England, then a conservative counter-revolution will; and in that case the movements towards Scottish, Welsh and even Ulster independence will acquire added progressive impetus and lustre, as relatively left-wing causes saving themselves from central reaction.'⁵² For eighteen years Thatcherism shaped this conservative counter-revolution of Nairn's worst fears, while the nationalist parties, as Tom predicted, went leftwards.

John Smith's legacy to Labour was a fundamental commitment to devolution, which Tony Blair balked at breaking. But for Nairn this represented only a reluctant conversion to the cause, and one that would not save Britain from the break-up that new Labour remains determined to prevent. The government was still far too much in the grip of the neo-liberal past: 'The iron of Thatcher had taken too strong a grip over its soul. By the time any left-of-centre regime works free of that incubus, it will probably be too late for the United Kingdom.'⁵³

Post-devolution, Nairn has argued not only that the process remains incomplete, but also that the completion will only occur when the English decide to join in. 'We have not come this far, through so much defeat and disappointment, in order to curl up inside an uppity hive of blethering British whingers, curmudgeonly husks who can go on surviving in defeat only because the English have not spoken yet.'⁵⁴ And still we don't speak. Englishness is an increasingly salient identity for many, and takes a variety of forms, but few provide us with a statecraft to equip England as a partner in the forthcoming break-up. It is important to understand that however central England might become in this eventual fracture, the separation is being driven not from what has traditionally considered itself the centre, but from nations that had been relegated to the margins. And here Scotland is playing a crucial part: 'Though the British Kingdom unites a surprising number of countries and cultures, ranging from Wales to the micro-nations of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, its backbone remains the link with Scotland.'⁵⁵

Once that link is broken, Britain no longer exists. After Britain, England. We may very well have to await that point of rupture to imagine England as a nation. But it would be better, much better, if England was preparing to be an active part of the break-up, rather than a rather reluctant product of it.

The becoming of England is not currently being driven by a movement, or a party, for English independence. However, a general election in 2010 with a Cameron majority built on English seats yet minority support in Scotland and Wales will create immense constitutional pressures. A year later elections will follow to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Despite the Tories' rising fortunes under Cameron there is absolutely no evidence of a significant recovery of his party in either Scotland or Wales. Labour will be reeling from the 2010 defeat. Having propped the party up with millionaire donations and turned their annual conference into a money-making corporate trade fair, Labour will struggle to hold its organisational fabric together. Party membership soared when Blair became leader but has plummeted ever since, and demoralisation and disorientation will now deepen. From 1979 to 1992 Labour maintained the semblance of effective opposition despite losing three general elections because the promise of a Labour government remained for millions the alternative to Thatcherism. After 2010 that narrative may not have the compelling purpose it once had, certainly not in the immediate aftermath of the wasted opportunity for change that Blair and Brown will come to represent following a heavy General Election defeat. The trade unions, who for all the glitzy rhetoric of modernisation remain the foundation of Labour's finances and organisation, will themselves be suffering from the impact of the recession on their members – many of whom will be questioning what their support for Labour has earned the unions in terms of influence.

There couldn't be a worse situation for Labour to campaign in the 2011 elections to restrict Scotland and Wales to more-or-less the current devolution settlement. Nationalist fervour, fundamentally anti-Tory, will be rampant – perhaps not with the breadth to secure independence in a referendum but almost certainly a solid enough bloc to entrench the process towards that ambition. In Scotland and Wales after 2010 independence won't simply be an end in itself: in place of British labourism it will be the purpose of opposition, and, unlike the period of 1979 to 1997, the institutions to fulfil that ambition now exist.

BACK TO FRONT AND POPULAR ENGLAND

In disentangling our Englishness from a Britishness which has denied the Scots and Welsh their independence we have the opportunity to achieve a progressive national settlement for ourselves. As George Monbiot describes it: 'Three nations in the United Kingdom, as a result of one of this government's rare progressive policies, now possess a representative assembly. The fourth, and largest, England, does not. England, the great colonising nation, has become a colony.'⁵⁶

A populist right defines the colonisation of England in terms of a Scottish raj, an ungrateful nation on our northern border, while wanting nothing to do with the continent except having cheap holidays and drinking bottles of plonk, and erecting barriers to keep out asylum-seekers and migrant workers. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe analyses the response to such a brand of politics in a context which has important implications for an alternative national-popular narrative of what England might become:

So far the answer has been completely inadequate because it has mainly consisted in moral condemnation. Of course, such a reaction fits perfectly with the dominant post-political perspective and it had to be expected. Given that politics had supposedly become 'non-adversarial' the frontier between us and them constitutive of politics can only be drawn in the moral register.⁵⁷

And this moralist response prevents the articulation of a political response: 'If a serious attempt is not made to address the democratic deficit that characterises the "post-political" age that neo-liberal hegemony has brought about, and to challenge the growing inequalities it has created, the diverse forms of resentment are bound to persist.'⁵⁸

England's populist right – best characterised by an ugly mixture of Kelvin McKenzie, Richard Littlejohn, Garry Bushell and Jeremy Clarkson – define their Englishness against the soggy social-democracy they blame on Scotland and its representatives in Labour's cabinet. For McKenzie Scottish independence can't come soon enough: 'A sick and skint nation, and the sooner we take them off the payroll the better.'⁵⁹ While Littlejohn is scathing in his contempt for Brownite Labour's celebration of Britishness: 'They believe we can all be brought together at one giant, multi-culti Union Jack-bedecked, Knees-up, Gordon Brown love-in, complete with organic chicken tikka and lo-alcohol

scrumpy.⁶⁰ Bushell blasts Labour's devolution for failing to satisfy England: 'The English put up with a lot, but there is a limit to how long the people of the UK's biggest and richest country will suffer being treated like second-class citizens.'⁶¹ And Clarkson doesn't like much of what the combined forces of immigration, Europe and devolution have done to our culture either: 'There's a mosque at the end of your street and a French restaurant next door. We are neither in nor out of Europe. We are famous for our beer but we drink in wine bars. We live in a United Kingdom that's no longer united.'⁶²

Anti-Scottish rabble-rousing – and the Welsh don't fare much better – more than a tinge of racism, hostility to Europe, and an anger focused on an out of touch political class. It's an explosive mix. So what might an alternative English politics moulded by the break-up look like?

First, it will be founded on a commitment to England being an active partner in the break-up, welcoming and supporting the civic nationalism being crafted by politicians and civil society the other side of our borders. By recognising the democratic alternative of independence to the archaic and deferential imperial British state, we carve out for ourselves a vision of England after Britain. And that means a break with the politics of Brownite Labour. Since Gordon's elevation to the leadership Labour has deepened a commitment to Britishness that began with the 'Cool Britannia' era of Blair's post-landslide afterglow. Tom Nairn describes the ideological role of this commitment:

In 1997 an effective over-arching belief system was urgently needed, above all by a movement then unused to office. Party survival itself prompted this compensation, rather than popular belief. But still, a declining or contested (British) nationalism offered a far stronger chance of redemption than a socialism ailing unto death all around the globe.⁶³

Blairism began by misunderstanding the dynamics of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, believing that devolution could be the buttress on which to build a new Britain in the image of their new Labour. And Brown, learning nothing from the impact of devolution seeks to see off the nationalist challenge with a Britishness that he has conjured out of misrepresenting civic nationalism: 'We will all lose if politicians play fast and loose with the Union and abandon national purpose to a focus on what divides. All political parties should learn from past mistakes: it is by showing what binds us together that we will energise the modern

British patriotic purpose we should all want to see.⁶⁴ Brown reveals a wilful misunderstanding of what constitutes a 'national purpose'. For a sizeable chunk of the Scottish and Welsh electorate, and now their legislatures too, there is a national purpose alright: it's to the left of Labour and no longer defines itself as British. There is not much of a single British national purpose any more, but neither – except for some fringe elements – is there a lot of energy for the ghoulful threat of hatred and division that Brown seeks to summon up.

Second, an English politics that happily co-exists with other nations' breaking up Britain will need a vision for its own national settlement. This is bound to be influenced by those new institutions on our borders, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. The foundation of each revealed a glaring democratic deficit. Despite new Labour's antipathy for proportional representation for Westminster all three are elected under this system, producing a legislature that is much more representative of the electorate's will than the one we're lumbered with at Westminster. The system, whilst not obscuring the necessities of adversarial politics, at the same time encourages coalition-building where parties share a broadly similar policy agenda. And furthermore – and again despite new Labour's opposition to such a policy for Westminster – all three have fixed-term parliaments, which significantly weakens the power of the majority party to set the election date to best suit their own electoral fortunes. Reproducing these two crucial changes, the benefits of which the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish have already seen – in a more representative, co-operative and accountable model of governance – could be the basis of England's own democratic settlement.

Third, we have already entered an era in which environmental politics have acquired an increasing importance, whilst climate change threatens to reach crisis proportions in the relatively near future. At its best civic nationalism combines a politics of friends of the earth, the country, the landscape, the habitat that we call home with a politics of friends of the Earth, our planet, demanding global co-operation against a wave of devastation that respects no frontiers. Environmentalism at the core of a progressive nationalism forces an internationalist imperative upon it.

Fourth – and arguably, for reasons of demography and history, this will be much more central to English civic nationalism than elsewhere – there is the question of a progressive stance on race and identity. Brown defined his version of Britishness via an ill-thought out carica-

ture of multiculturalism: 'We are waking from a once-fashionable view of multiculturalism, which, by emphasising the separate and the exclusive, simply pushed communities apart.'⁶⁵ For a Labour politician who throughout his long career has hardly uttered a word, or written a sentence, to suggest any understanding of the complexities of modern racism, this was an extraordinary intervention. An English identity based on such shoddy sentiments and rank opportunism will soon flounder in the face of those who will seek to use the break-up to enforce a racialisation of Englishness. Instead we need to construct a framework which celebrates diversity as a core value of social solidarity. Rachel Briggs has suggested that Brown is in danger of driving the debate towards a short cut to reaction:

For a Scottish Prime Minister in a fragmented United Kingdom, the temptation will always be to reach for that which unites rather than divides. But top-down, stage-managed national identities are not only unworkable, they are likely to increase the sense of personal and collective uncertainty as people are rightly suspicious of what they seek to hide.⁶⁶

Instead Rachel outlines a riskier but more purposeful journey towards an inclusive national identity, focused especially on a very different relationship with politicised sections of England's Muslim communities from that outlined by Brown:

Activism and dissent can be a pathway into engagement in other forms of civic and political participation, and it is only by surfacing and working through difference that we will achieve meaningful and lasting cohesion. It will take political bravery to embrace the voices of dissent and challenge those who have managed to dominate mainstream thinking so far.

These four core themes are certainly not right-wing and nor are they particularly left-wing. That's not the point. They are plural values that appeal across parties, as well as to a majority who have no party to call their own. What will bind together those who identify with the project are ideals – something increasingly rare in modern politics – for an England they want to become. A vision for England after Britain which is both populist and progressive. One entirely different from the exclusively white and rather unpleasant land the populist right would seem

to prefer. At the point of rupture with the home comforts of Britishness, these four themes provide the beginnings of a political imaginary for an English left, remaking the national-popular through ideas that can awaken and cohere a collective will in order to win the contest for what England might become.

THE FINAL PIECE OF THE JIGSAW

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear

Antonio Gramsci⁶⁷

Sunday 8 February 2009. Spurs vs Arsenal – the north London grudge match that remains one of the great local derbies of English football. My match programme handily provides a flag beside each player's name and squad number. And the game is a drab 0-0 draw, so in between all the lack of excitement I jot down that on the pitch that there are five Frenchmen, two Croatians, two Cameroonians, two Ivorians, one Italian, one Moroccan, one Honduran, a Togan, a Dane, a Dutchman, an Irishman, a Russian, a Spaniard and a Brazilian. The only North Londoner who might have been playing, Ledley King, is injured – as he usually is. Arsenal's lone Englishman was the 87th minute sub Kieran Gibbs and he's from Croydon, south of the river where, as every Spurs fan knows, his team originally came from, and where they can eff off back to. When Spurs last won the league, a long time ago admittedly, a foreign player was a Scot, a Welsh or a Northern Irishman. Football is the most europeanised, globalised, of any English institution, including the owners, management and fans. By and large this isn't resented. It has introduced a cosy cosmopolitanism into what was once a mainly parochial sport with sometimes racist undercurrents. But is it entirely satisfactory when the North London derby is played without a single North Londoner on the teamsheet of either side? Arsenal have won the league a lot more recently than Spurs, but perhaps their greatest ever triumph was twenty years ago, in 1989, when they won it at Anfield – with a team built around Michael Thomas, Paul Davis and David Rocastle, black lads who learnt their game on the London council estates where they grew up. Today's Arsenal is loved just the same by the Gooner faithful, but it's not the same and there's no point pretending it is.

Saturday 14 February. Early morning in Hyde Park. Over one hundred vehicles are parking up. It's the send-off for the Viva Palestina convoy driving to Gaza via Belgium, France, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Organised by Respect MP George Galloway, this has proved to be a hugely popular initiative. Each truck, van, car is packed with materials, there's an ambulance and a fire engine, a boat for the Gazan fishing fleet, a generator to power a school and a cement mixer to help with the rebuilding of homes destroyed by the Israeli air assault. The drivers and crew are almost all Muslim. From Bolton, Bury and Blackburn, Birmingham and Bradford, Keighley, Dewsbury, Rochdale, Luton, Manchester and London. As I help issue all those going with the T-shirts that Philosophy Football are donating, we chat about Bolton Wanderers, the Bolton contingent's under-performing local football team, whilst most of the Brum group seem to favour Villa over the Blues. The 'Batley Boys' all roll up to be kitted out together, reporting in their broad Yorkshire accents. Each group shows a real pride in the town or city where they come from, the places daubed all over their vehicles in huge letters, and shouted out as we tick them off at registration. Proud of their town and proud of their internationalism, and shaped in large measure for the majority who are going by their faith. This combination of internationalism and Islam – which the government sees as divisive and has sought to demonise and criminalise – this morning has a vibrant, inclusive unity that is infectious. The drivers are travelling across Europe and North Africa for a cause supported by many who don't share their faith: aid to Gaza. Respect party leader Salma Yaqoob has described the importance of the kind of values-led coming-together that was first fused by opposition to the war in Iraq, and now has been strengthened even more by the response to the Gaza emergency: 'We talk about Britain being multicultural, diverse and tolerant, but it's when you need those things that they become meaningful. The anti-war movement restored a sense of belonging.'⁶⁸

The following Friday Martin Kettle is pontificating in my breakfast table copy of the *Guardian*. I long ago gave up on the kind of enthusiasm Martin had first for Blair and now for Brown, but he's a thoughtful writer and always worth reading. In his column he is fishing around for the future of the centre-left, you know, that lot who marched off rightwards around 1997, leaving a sizeable portion behind who now don't have any sort of party to vote for with much enthusiasm – at least in England. Martin is concerned with what might happen to

Labour after a heavy 2010 defeat and, having been disappointed by Brown, he's trying to convince himself, and his readers, that the Lib Dem's Nick Clegg is the answer. I'm not buying that, but amongst my spluttering over the marmite, toast and Innocent smoothie there's at least some sense in Martin's argument: 'Irrespective of who succeeds Gordon Brown, the defeated Labour Party of 2010 will be a much weaker, more confused and rudderless party than its 1983 predecessor. The strange death of Labour England? It can't be ruled out.'⁶⁹ But Martin entirely misses the point. The mortality of Labour in its current form in England is a racing certainty. In Scotland it has been eclipsed by another, more social-democratic party, and for a while it haemorrhaged support to the Scottish Socialists, but at least it has some kind of significant future, the more so as it defines itself as a Scottish Labour Party. In Wales Labour does comparatively well, governing in mainly harmonious coalition with Plaid Cymru. The death rattle of Labourism is a specifically English complaint, and finding a remedy will define the country that England finally becomes.

The local versus the global, inclusive communities emerging out of shared interests, the broken narrative of the unionist left – these will be three crucial aspects of the changing shape of England as it copes with the early tremors of the break-up.

The cult TV series *Gavin and Stacey* provides a handy reference point for how far we've already travelled during the past decade towards a break-up in all but name. The opening credits of the very first episode of this Anglo-Welsh romantic comedy provide a geography lesson for any viewers unsure how the lovestruck pair will navigate a way through their post-devolution relationship. 'Barry Island, Wales' is where Stacey lives and works, while Gavin is from 'Essex, England'. England, another country. Stacey knows it, so does Gavin – the final jigsaw piece of a state formerly known as Britain.

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