

Robin Cook's chicken tikka masala speech

Extracts from a speech by the foreign secretary to the Social Market Foundation in London

Robin Cook

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Tonight I want to celebrate Britishness. As Foreign Secretary I see every day the importance of our relations with foreign countries to the strength of our economy, to the security of our nation, to the safety of our people against organised crime, even to the health of our environment. A globalised world demands more foreign contacts than even Britain has experienced in the past. I also know that we are likely to make our way more successfully in the world if we are secure in our British identity, and confident about its future. That security and confidence is important for the inner strength it gives us in our conduct of business with others. I want to argue the case why we can be confident about the strength and the future of British identity.

Sadly, it has become fashionable for some to argue that British identity is under siege, perhaps even in a state of terminal decline. The threat is said to come in three forms.

First, the arrival of immigrants who, allegedly, do not share our cultural values and who fail to support the England cricket team. Few dare to state this case explicitly, but it is the unmistakable subliminal message.

Second, our continued membership of the European Union, which is said to be absorbing member states into a country called Europe.

Third, the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is seen as a step to the break-up of the UK.

This evening, I want to set out the reasons for being optimistic about the future of Britain and Britishness. Indeed, I want to go further and argue that in each of the areas where the pessimists identify a threat, we should instead see developments that will strengthen and renew British identity.

Multicultural Britain

The first element in the debate about the future of Britishness is the changing ethnic composition of the British people themselves. The British are not a race, but a gathering of countless different races and communities, the vast majority of which were not indigenous to these islands.

In the pre-industrial era, when transport and communications were often easier by sea than by land, Britain was unusually open to external influence; first through foreign invasion, then, after Britain achieved naval supremacy, through commerce and imperial expansion. It is not their purity that makes the British unique, but the sheer pluralism of their ancestry.

London was first established as the capital of a Celtic Britain by Romans from Italy. They were in turn driven out by Saxons and Angles from Germany. The great cathedrals of this land were built mostly by Norman Bishops, but the religion practised in them was secured by the succession of a Dutch Prince. Outside our Parliament, Richard the Lionheart proudly sits astride his steed. A symbol of British courage and defiance. Yet he spoke French much of his life and depended on the Jewish community of England to put up the ransom that freed him from prison.

The idea that Britain was a pure Anglo-Saxon society before the arrival of communities from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa is fantasy. But if this view of British identity is false to our past, it is false to our future too. The global era has produced population movements of a breadth and richness without parallel in history.

Today's London is a perfect hub of the globe. It is home to over 30 ethnic communities of at least 10,000 residents each. In this city tonight, over 300 languages will be spoken by families over their evening meal at home.

This pluralism is not a burden we must reluctantly accept. It is an immense asset that contributes to the cultural and economic vitality of our nation.

Legitimate immigration is the necessary and unavoidable result of economic success, which generates a demand for labour faster than can be met by the birth-rate of a modern developed country. Every country needs firm but fair immigration laws. There is no more evil business than trafficking in human beings and nothing corrodes social cohesion worse than a furtive underground of illegal migrants beyond legal protection against exploitation. But we must also create an open and inclusive society that welcomes incomers for their contribution to our growth and prosperity. Our measures to attract specialists in information technology is a good example.

Our cultural diversity is one of the reasons why Britain continues to be the preferred location for multinational companies setting up in Europe. The national airline of a major European country has recently relocated its booking operation to London precisely because of the linguistic variety of the staff whom it can recruit here.

And it isn't just our economy that has been enriched by the arrival of new communities. Our lifestyles and cultural horizons have also been broadened in the process. This point is perhaps more readily understood by young Britons, who are more open to new influences and more likely to have been educated in a multi-ethnic environment. But it reaches into every aspect of our national life.

Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.

Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness.

The modern notion of national identity cannot be based on race and ethnicity, but must be based on shared ideals and aspirations. Some of the most successful countries in the modern world, such as the United States and Canada, are immigrant societies. Their experience shows how

cultural diversity, allied to a shared concept of equal citizenship, can be a source of enormous strength. We should draw inspiration from their experience.

Britishness and European integration

To deny that Britain is European is to deny both our geography and our history. Our culture, our security, and our prosperity, are inseparable from the continent of Europe.

Underlying the anti-European case is the belief that there is an alternative future available to Britain. It used to be argued that the European Union is not Europe and that Britain could exist perfectly comfortably as one of a number of European countries maintaining a loose association with Brussels. But with the majority of non-EU states now clamouring for full membership, the changing geopolitics of Europe have consigned that argument to the past.

Some anti-Europeans now argue that Britain's destiny lies outside Europe, as part of the English-speaking world and a member of NAFTA.

Yet Britain trades three times more with the rest of the EU than we do with NAFTA. The reason why over four thousand US companies have located here is because they want to export to Europe. If they only wanted to sell to NAFTA, they would have stayed at home.

Europe is where our domestic quality of life is most directly at stake, whether the issue is environmental standards, the fight against organised crime, policy on asylum or stability on the continent.

But it is not simply a question of economic and political realism that ties Britain to Europe, compelling as those arguments are. Britain is also a European country in the more profound sense of sharing European assumptions about how society should be organised. The last international survey of social attitudes put Britain squarely within the European mainstream on our approach to social justice and public services, such as health.

There are strong ties of kinship between Britain and North America. These are an immense asset to us in the modern world. The US and the UK are each others closest allies. But our value as an ally to our friends in Washington is in direct proportion to our influence with our partners in Europe.

I do not accept that to acknowledge our European identity diminishes our Britishness. Nor do I accept that membership of the European Union is a threat to our national identity.

None of our European partners, with their own proud national traditions, seem afflicted by this self-doubt and insecurity. The idea that the French, the Germans or the Spanish are attempting to erase their national identities by constructing a country called Europe is the mother of all Euromyths. On the contrary, our partners see their membership of a successful European Union as underwriting, not undermining, their assertion of national identity.

For France, Germany and Italy, the European Community was central to the renewal of their nations and the regeneration of their economies in the post-War period. To Spain, Portugal and Greece, joining the European Community was an affirmation of their freedom from fascism and a guarantee of a democratic future. To Austria and Finland, joining the European Community was a celebration of the end of the Cold War, which enabled them to make a free choice in their national orientation.

The same is true of the dozen new candidates for membership from the former communist bloc. All of them aspire to membership of the European Union because it will be an affirmation of their regained independence. None of them see it as a threat to their national identity.

Ireland joined at the same time as Britain. Its period of membership has transformed Ireland into a country with a dynamic economy and a cosmopolitan society. The result has been a new assertiveness of national identity, and confidence in their culture. We can see that for ourselves in Britain through the new affection for Irish music and dance, and the attachment to Irish pubs.

Britain has everything to gain from being a leading partner in a strong Europe. All we have to lose is the timidity which prevents us from embracing our European destiny and from recognising that it is a source of confidence in our nations future.

In the aftermath of Nice, it is clearer than ever that a strong Europe requires strong nations. With the accession of up to twelve new member states, the European Union is set to become even more diverse. In the next Inter-Governmental Conference, the challenge is to find the right balance between European and national decision-making and to enhance the EU's legitimacy by harnessing the democratic traditions of its member states.

This is a debate that Britain can play a pivotal role in shaping. But we can only do so if we reject insular nationalism and the politics of fear by engaging fully and confidently in Europe.

Britishness and devolution

The last of the three perceived threats to Britishness is the new flexibility in our modern constitution.

The devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will stand the test of time as one of this Governments most radical and significant achievements. The creation of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly allows both nations to choose the policies that are right for them through their own democratic structures. In Northern Ireland, devolution was needed for a different reason - to enable the communities of a divided society to share power and to work together to build a common future. In all three cases, I am convinced that our reforms were essential.

Let us put to bed the scare stories about devolution leading to the Death of Britain. Devolution has been a success for Scotland and for Wales, but it has also been a success for Britain. The votes for devolution in the referendums were not votes for separation. They were votes to remain in the United Kingdom with a new constitutional settlement. By recognising the United Kingdoms diversity, devolution has guaranteed its future. It is striking that today opinion polls in Scotland show that support for separation from the rest of Britain is lower than at the time of the referendum four years ago.

Centuries of living together and working together have created enduring bonds between each of the constituent nations that make up Britain. Our future together in a single state is all the more secure if we each respect the distinctive identity that makes some of us Scottish and others Welsh or English. That mutual respect strengthens our common identity as British.

Our peoples already practise this subsidiarity of identity in their expressions of sporting loyalty. They watch Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland at football. They cheer for the British

team in the Olympics. And they support Europe at golf in the Ryder Cup. In context, each is a valid expression of our identity.

We should not fear the consequences of applying this principle in political life. In Scotland, the legal and educational systems are important expressions of Scottishness. At a British level, there is a strong attachment to institutions such as the National Health Service, the BBC and the armed forces. In Europe, we work with fourteen other nations to build the Single Market and to use our joint strength in trade negotiations. Action at one level does not invalidate our commitment to work at the other levels. On the contrary, they reinforce each other.

I get impatient when I see opinion polls that ask respondents whether they feel more Scottish or English than British, or more British than European, as if these choices were mutually exclusive. Identity is not a finite substance to be shared out between competing loyalties. It embraces numerous dimensions, each of which serves to amplify and reinforce the others.

Conclusion

In our thousand years of history, the homogeneity of British identity that some people assume to be the norm was confined to a relatively brief period. It lasted from the Victorian era of imperial expansion to the aftermath of the Second World War and depended on the unifying force of those two extraordinary experiences. The diversity of modern Britain expressed through devolution and multiculturalism is more consistent with the historical experience of our islands.

Far from making Britishness redundant, it makes the need for a shared framework of values and institutions all the more relevant. To act as a unifying force, that framework must be one that reflects the realities of contemporary Britain.

It is natural for every nation to be proud of its identity. We should be proud to be British. But we should be proud of the real Britain of the modern age.

Proud that the strength of the British character reflects the influences of the many different communities who have made their home here over the centuries. Proud that openness, mutual respect and generosity of spirit are essential British values.

We should be proud that those British values have made Britain a successful multi-ethnic society. We should welcome that pluralism as a unique asset for Britain in a modern world where our prosperity, our security and our influence depend on the health of our relations with other peoples around the globe.

Tolerance is important, but it is not enough. We should celebrate the enormous contribution of the many communities in Britain to strengthening our economy, to supporting our public services, and to enriching our culture and cuisine. And we should recognise that its diversity is part of the reason why Britain is a great place to live.

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