

Chapitre I

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Introduction

Le Royaume-Uni fut bâti au cours des siècles par la volonté des monarques d'Angleterre, la puissance dominante des Îles britanniques. Par sa constitution, le Royaume-Uni est un État unitaire — non fédéral — mais, en raison de son histoire (conquête des pays celtes voisins, construction d'un empire colonial), il offre de nos jours l'image d'un pays multi-national, multi-ethnique, multi-religieux, à tel point que l'on peut se demander ce qu'être britannique peut encore signifier. Une politique de décentralisation a été mise en œuvre depuis 1997, mais certains remettent en cause l'existence même du Royaume-Uni (voir chapitre 14).

Le pays a considérablement changé depuis les années soixante : révolution des mœurs d'abord, fin du consensus politique et révolution thatchérienne ensuite. La Grande-Bretagne est devenue la tête de pont du libéralisme économique en Europe. Cependant la réussite des uns ne saurait faire oublier la détresse des plus pauvres. Enfin, si le pays s'est ouvert aux influences extérieures, en particulier celles venues du continent, la confiance dans les valeurs traditionnelles et les institutions s'est effritée et les problèmes de société, par exemple, la montée de la violence, ne laissent pas d'inquiéter.

Le Royaume-Uni est aujourd'hui une puissance moyenne, mais l'empreinte de son passé de grande puissance économique, militaire et coloniale, isolée du continent, demeure présente. Désireux de cultiver la "relation privilégiée" avec les États-Unis et les liens avec les pays du Commonwealth, les gouvernements ont rarement joué le jeu européen sans arrière-pensées. De nombreux Britanniques voient dans l'intégration européenne avant tout une perte de souveraineté nationale et certains seraient prêts à soutenir un retrait de l'Union européenne. En 1999, le gouvernement travailliste ne semblait guère décidé à braver cette fraction de l'opinion en conduisant une politique européenne volontariste.

I – Historical background, the four nations, overseas territories

The UK (in full, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland, or Eire, form the British Isles. The UK consists of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland (the former Irish province of Ulster). The terms "Great Britain" and, increasingly, plain "Britain" are used to refer to the UK; the adjective "British" is the only one available to describe something pertaining to or someone from the UK. A Briton is technically a UK citizen but people who hold a British passport think of themselves primarily as a citizen of one the four nations: English, Welsh, Scottish or (Northern) Irish. The fact that "English" is used unduly to refer indiscriminately to somebody British is a sign of the historic political and economic dominance of England. A significant part of the political history of the UK until the 19th century is that of the extension of the domination of England over the "Celtic fringe*" i.e. the other three home nations: Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

A – History

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| c. 250 000 BC | First evidence of human life in the area |
| c. 5 000 BC | Britain became an island |
| c. 3 000 BC | Neolithic people (from Spain, North Africa?) settled; left stone circles (e.g. Stonehenge); followed by "Beaker people" of Alpine stock |
| c. 700 BC | Celtic peoples from Europe, organised in tribes (kin groups), spread their culture over Britain |
| 55-54 BC | Julius Caesar's expeditions to Britain |
| 43 AD | Roman invasion under Claudius Roman colony named Britannia; the Celtic fringe: west of Wales, north of Scotland (Caledonia) and Ireland (Hibernia) not invaded |
| 409 | End of Roman rule in Britain |
| c. 440-late 8th century | Angles, Saxons and Jutes, three Germanic tribes, invaded present-day England and established seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Saxon heptarchy) |
| 793 | First Viking invasion: during the 9th century, Norsemen and Danes settled in parts of Ireland, north of Scotland and in England (Midlands, East Anglia) |
| 1016 | Saxons finally defeated by Danes. Cnut became King of England, now part of a vast Scandinavian empire |
| 1066 | William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England French, the language of the ruling elite, became the official language of politics and law |
| 1154-1168 | Maine, Aquitaine and Brittany, in addition to Normandy, became English possessions |
| 1170 | Dublin and small area around it (the Pale) controlled by the English |
| 1276-1283 | Wales conquered by Edward I. Prince Edward: first Prince of Wales in 1301 |

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1312 | Robert Bruce defeated the English at Bannockburn, thus securing Scottish independence |
| 1346-1453 | Hundred Years' War, at the end of which only Calais remained an English possession |
| 1362 | English took over from French as the official language in Parliament and law courts |
| 1536-1543 | Wales and England brought under one common administration |
| 1560s | Triangular trade with newly established colonies in the West Indies and North America began |
| 1603 | Union of English and Scottish crowns: King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England |
| 1611 | Ireland became England's first major colony Plantation of Ulster: Protestant settlers took most of the land |
| 1707 | Act of Union: Scotland lost its Parliament, which was incorporated into the Westminster Parliament |
| 1783 | Treaty of Paris: Britain lost its 13 American colonies |
| 1800 | Act of Union between Ireland and England Parliamentary union became effective in 1801 |
| 1902 | At the end of the South African war, British Empire at the height of its power |
| 1921 | Irish Free State set up |
| 1931 | Statute of Westminster codified doctrine of the British Commonwealth of Nations and status of member countries |
| 1947 | Partition of India and Pakistan, which gained their independence |
| 1949 | Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland |
| 1973 | The UK joined the European Economic Community |

B – The four home nations

Each of the four nations has its own flag and patron saint, its own sports teams (at least for some sports like soccer, though there is only one Olympic team for the whole UK). Under English rule Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland managed or were allowed to keep some specific features e.g. in their educational or legal system, and each now has its own national assembly or parliament.

The word "national" refers both to each of the four individual nations and to Britain. Thus the Union Jack is the national flag of the UK, made of the combined flags of three nations: England's St George's cross (red on white), Scotland's St Andrew's cross (white on blue, diagonally) and Ireland's St Patrick's cross (red on white diagonally). Each nation has its national anthem*, but that of England, *God Save the Queen*, is also the British national anthem.

In addition to the four nations, there are two Crown Dependencies, which are not part of the UK: the Channel Islands (including Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark) off the French Normandy coast, and the Isle of Man between the north west of England and Northern Ireland. They have their own Parliament and tax system: they are tax havens*. They are largely self governing

but a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the British government represents the Queen.

C – Overseas Territories

Overseas Territories are what is left of the British Empire, with an overall population of 200,000. Three-quarters of them live in Caribbean islands whose economies are based mostly on tourism and financial services: Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos Islands. In Europe, 30,000 people live in Gibraltar, a strategic place which used to control the entrance to the Mediterranean. The South Atlantic Ocean Territories, which include Ascension Island, Saint Helena and the Falkland Islands are sparsely populated. The British Indian Territories and the vast British Antarctic Territory (1.7m sq Km) have no permanent inhabitants. Most of these territories are largely self-governed* and have their own elected assemblies but they also have governors appointed by the Queen; a specific department within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office oversees programmes for economic and social development. They are entitled to claim their independence if they so wish. The Falkland Islands and Gibraltar have a special status, since Argentina and Spain respectively have laid claim to them: the UK guarantees that they will remain under British sovereignty as long as they wish.

II – The UK population

The UK has an area of 243,000 square kilometres, which places it in seventh position in the European Union behind Italy. But the density of its population is well above the EU average. England is by far the most densely populated of the four nations and Scotland the least, well below the EU average.

| | Area (sq Km) | Population (millions) | Density (per sq Km) |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| England | 130,000 | 48.9 | 375 |
| Scotland | 78,000 | 5.1 | 66 |
| Wales | 20,700 | 2.9 | 140 |
| N. Ireland | 13,500 | 1.6 | 122 |
| Total | 243,000 | 58.6 | 241 |
| France | 543,000 | 58.1 | 107 |
| EU | 3,192,000 | 372.1 | 117 |

The UK population in 1995 (source: Britain 1999)

The overall population is still growing slowly: it was estimated to be 59 million in 1997. Two English regions, the North-West and Merseyside (the third most populated region) and the North-East, actually lost some of their population to the south of England in the period 1981-1996. As English people prefer living in houses rather than flats, land in the south of England is at a

premium and plans to extend small villages by building large estates to take overspill* from urban areas are often controversial. Three-quarters of the population live in towns and cities. England has 18 cities over 200,000 inhabitants, Wales has one (Cardiff), Scotland two (Glasgow and Edinburgh), Northern Ireland one (Belfast). Britain's largest cities are, in order, London (the Greater London area holds 20% of the UK population), Birmingham (1m), Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. But these cities are also the centres of large conurbations. London is the political, cultural and financial centre of the UK. It houses the UK Parliament, the central government departments, the headquarters of the national TV networks and papers, the Bank of England and the City.

A – Ethnic groups

The population of the UK —and particularly that of England, is multi-national and multi-ethnic. Protestants from Scotland and England settled in Ireland, hence the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland. In the 19th century many Irish people emigrated to Scotland, hence the large Catholic community there (0.8 million people). In England especially, in addition to the millions of people or descendants of people who migrated from Wales, Scotland and Ireland, there are also millions who come from former overseas colonies:

- West Indians from the Caribbean
- Black Africans
- Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis from the South Asian sub-continent i.e. from what used to be India before independence (the phrase Asian Britons usually refers to this group in British English)
- Chinese from China and other south-east Asian countries.

The bulk of immigration from South Asia and the Caribbean took place in the 1950s and early 1960s when the British economy was short of labour. There are also Europeans; many (mostly Jewish people) came from Eastern and central Europe fleeing Nazism and later Communist regimes, but there is also more recent immigration, notably from southern Europe.

The 1991 census* was the first one in which respondents were asked about their ethnic background. Over 5% (3 million) of the population belonged to other groups than white. Half of them were born in the UK.

| Ethnic groups | millions |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| black groups | 0.9 |
| including: – black Caribbeans | 0.5 |
| – black Africans | 0.2 |
| Indians | 0.8 |
| Pakistanis | 0.5 |
| Chinese | 0.16 |
| Bangladeshis | 0.16 |

(source: *Britain 1999*)

They live mostly in urban areas. Half of them live in the South-East of England with more than half of black British citizens and 40% of Indians in London; but there are large concentrations of Asians in the Midlands (e.g. Leicester) and West Yorkshire (Bradford, which has a big Pakistani community).

B – Religions

Because it is multi-national and increasingly multi-ethnic, the UK is more than ever a multi-religious country. A large majority of the British population consider themselves as Protestants, whether Church of England, Church of Scotland or Free Church (i.e. dissenters, or non-conformists): mainly Methodists, Baptists and United Reformed Church. About 10% describe themselves as Catholics, and 2% as Jews (Sephardim from Spain and Portugal, and Ashkenazim from central and eastern Europe). There are about half a million Hindus, and about as many Sikhs (from Punjab in India). But the Muslims form the largest non-Christian community in the UK, with between 1 and 1.5 million, mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

C – Languages

Compulsory education from the age of five dispensed in English means that all British people can use this language even if it comes in several dialectal forms, depending on the geographical location and class of its speakers. Modern English is the language which has evolved from the combination of the Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons and the French brought in by the Norman invaders. Standard English (syntax and vocabulary) constitutes the English taught at school. RP (Received Pronunciation English), which is the model generally taught abroad, and that taught in "good" schools and by elocution teachers in the UK, is spoken by only a small percentage of the population (under 5% according to some linguists). "Estuary English," a model based on the traditional London accent, and used in many TV programmes, is becoming increasingly popular, especially among the younger generation.

However, other languages co-exist with English. Celtic languages have not quite been wiped out by English. Welsh is spoken as a first language by about 20% of the Welsh people, especially in the rural west and north-west of Wales. Public notices are bilingual, Welsh is taught in most schools, and there is a Welsh TV channel. Another Celtic language, Scottish Gaelic, which has survived in the western Highlands and islands, is spoken as a mother tongue by a small percentage of Scots.

Asian Britons in particular continue to use their native language—at home especially—and there are newspapers—including special editions of local newspapers—published in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi and Punjabi. Administrative (health, social security etc.) pamphlets are also often available in these languages.

III – Identity

A – Britishness vs national, ethnic and class characteristics

What precedes shows that it is difficult to define "Britishness." People from ethnic minorities will probably feel that their loyalty goes first to their family's country of origin, even if they were born in the UK. Sports events give ample evidence of this: in international football matches, of course, but also in cricket test matches, they will support their team. With the rise of nationalism, and recent devolution (see chapter 3) giving them a greater say in the running of national affairs, the Scots—and to a lesser degree, the Welsh—will probably feel increasingly that they belong first and foremost to their nation. In Northern Ireland, people identify with their religious group. Catholics and Protestants live side by side, but generally do not mix, except when they go to university. Intermarriages are extremely rare, and can be fiercely resented. In 1999, a Protestant woman, who had married a Catholic in 1963, was killed by a Loyalist terrorist bomb in her home. In this new context, some claim that defining "Englishness" (being a native English person) is more puzzling than ever. Indeed there are major differences according to region and class.

In Britain, class remains the great divider. It is not only a matter of personal wealth, it conditions the way people are educated, their social behaviour, the brand of English they speak. Upper class* and upper middle class* people do not really mix with the lower social classes*. That is why the "*nouveaux riches*," especially successful business people, including those from ethnic minorities, might copy the social behavioural patterns of the higher classes, but will find it hard to be accepted. Conversely, a number of people who objectively, i.e. from a socio-economic point of view, belong to the middle class* (admittedly a rather broad concept) will describe themselves as working class*, because being middle class means being snobbish, bourgeois, affected, and even hypocritical, whilst being working class may mean being natural, sincere, convivial, and fun. As a result of the same inverted snobbery, they may affect to speak with a brand of English which includes non-RP features. For example, the leader of the Conservative Party, William Hague, a Northerner educated at Oxford, seems to cultivate his northern vowels to appear closer to the people.

Stereotypes express national or ethnic or class differences which may have an element of truth in them, but which are obviously far too general, and often outdated. Thus the Scots are reputed to be careful with money, if not downright mean, which is not surprising considering the country's past economic hardships. Welsh people are reputed to be good singers, Caribbeans music-lovers: the former are supposed to be endowed with great poetic imagination and artistic talent, while for the latter, love of music is supposed to fit in with their carefree attitude towards life. Asians are seen as ambitious, hardworking and talented for business, the model being the successful 'corner shop'* owner. Obviously, some of the positive features of these cultural clichés are endorsed by the people concerned. Thus in England, Northerners see themselves as friendly, generous, tough and funny, whereas they see Southerners as cold, hypocritical, and softer. But conversely, people in the

more affluent south feel superior to the ignorant, vulgar beer-drinkers of the north.

B – Images of Britain and the British

However, some stereotypes apply to Britain and the British as a whole. Some of them predate the ethnic diversity mentioned above, others may attribute outstanding features of the dominant nation, the English, to all Britons. Some of these are part of the image that British people have of themselves, others have more to do with the image of Britain abroad. What is striking is that such stereotypes are often contradictory and draw an observer's attention to paradoxes. Many British people would probably dismiss as outdated John Major's nostalgic description of Britain as a country of "long shadows on county grounds*, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers*."

- British people are conservative, and believe in tradition: they are attached to their institutions, the monarchy, Oxbridge, Parliament, the BBC, as well as family values. They are conformist and formal. They like socialising: they belong to clubs, like meeting at the pub.

versus

They are eccentric and individualistic: English aristocrats have often been seen as oddballs*, behaving strangely, new hairstyles and fashions, body-piercing have often originated in the UK; the number of broken marriages is on the increase (divorce rate is 45%). They use first names rather than surnames (e.g. university students to lecturers; employees to bosses).

- British people are reserved; they dislike emotional displays, kisses and handshakes, and generally avoid physical contact. Sex education, although officially compulsory, is often not taught, because anything related to sex is a matter of embarrassment.

versus

Sexual innuendo is *de rigueur* in many TV shows and comedy programmes; the rate of teenage pregnancies is the highest in Europe.

- British people are tolerant and generous: different religious groups live in harmony; alternative life-styles are accepted; many charity organisations (e.g. Oxfam) and other NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International) were set up in the UK.

versus

Anti-Europeanism can be virulent; anti-foreign feeling can run very high (e.g. football hooligans).

- British people love animals, nature: environmentalist campaigns to preserve natural sites, against new road links, and against GM* food.

versus

Fox-hunting* is still legal; most of Britain is a crowded, polluted country which still bears the marks of the Industrial Revolution.

C – Britain: an insular country?

In the eyes of foreigners, Britain often appears as an insular country, where it rains all the time, and where the food is particularly bad. The last two clichés are easy to dismiss. Cambridge, in south-east England, has a lower annual rainfall than Paris or Rome; British cooking, which in the 1950s and 60s suffered from a