

The British left must stop stereotyping English workers as racist

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The British left has an opportunity to shape a progressive English identity. It starts with abandoning elite liberal assumptions about working class Englishness.

It is 76 years since George Orwell wrote [for a British audience] that “in left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman”, but parts of the left are still reluctant to talk about England. The recent successful launch of the English Labour Network still attracted shrill Twitter voices saying “Ukip-lite”. Some still associate being English with the English Defence League, neo-Nazis and racism.

Englishness is not homogenous: there is much to delight, and undoubtedly aspects to dislike, but allowing liberal distaste to prevent genuine engagement would be a huge strategic mistake for the left. There’s an opportunity to shape a progressive, inclusive English identity, and the challenges can be readily overcome.

It’s not good to ignore large numbers of people. More people say they are English than any other national identity. Half the population not only identify as English but do so as intensely as possible (putting themselves 7 on a scale of 1-7). That’s either an awful lot of neo-Nazis or Englishness is an identity of choice for a very wide range of people.

The stereotyping of the English

Many of us combine several identities: place, nation, faith, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. They don’t dictate how we behave, or what we feel, but most of us want our identities to be respected even by people who don’t agree with us. The left is used to respecting different identities even if we don’t always share their values. English people should not be subject to a different standard.

National identities can be a source of a strong collective interest, of common concern and willingness to stand up for the common good. They are not fixed but made and remade over time. Britishness was once so associated with racism and colonialism that people thought it could never be shared by ethnic minorities. Today, minority communities are more likely to identify as British than the majority. The symbols of Englishness, too, are contested and changing.

If you want to find a hard core, “whites only”, anti-migrant, authoritarian, right-wing Englishness that rejects diversity and equality, you certainly can. But it’s far from the whole picture. To assume all the English share such views is wrong and offensive.

The politics of the English

A recent British Academy paper set out recent evidence on Englishness. It’s an identity shared across social classes and regions, but held most intensely amongst voters who are older, or who have spent less time in education, and feel patriotic. Most place themselves in the centre or on the

left, rather than on the right, of politics. Their spread of views on the NHS, redistribution, education and crime are broadly the same (and as broadly progressive) as other voters. They are somewhat more likely to hold “authoritarian” (or socially conservative) attitudes and to support some populist political attitudes, but Englishness isn’t linked to the entrenched right-wing views in the way that many assume.

Yet English identifying voters were much more like to vote Leave than the British. In 2015, Labour came third amongst “English only” voters, recovering only partially in 2017 as some Ukip voters switched to Labour. This divergence is quite new. In Labour’s 2001 landslide there was little difference in the voting patterns of English and British identifiers.

The swing toward Leave and the right may have been driven by concern about the cultural impact of immigration, perhaps reinforced by the common view that Englishness comes with being born and brought up here.

Nearly 80 per cent of people believe that immigration is too high, but this rises to 90 per cent for the “English not British”. Worries about the economic impact of migration have also hardened most strongly amongst the “English not British”. The left is beginning to acknowledge these economic fears, as Jeremy Corbyn has done recently, but the most intensely English also have the strongest cultural concerns.

Four out of five believe that to be counted as English, people need to pay their taxes here, “contribute to society” and consider themselves English. Around three in four think it is important to be born here. Englishness is obviously a more conditional identity than Britishness (which can simply be a badge of legal citizenship). It is no surprise that while many black and minority ethnic voters have some English identity (and are nearly as likely to be “equally English and British” as white voters), many more are “British not English” than “English not British”.

Some will see this cultural resistance to migration, and the emphasis on patrimony, as sufficient reason to reject Englishness. But this doesn’t help engage with English voters, or play any role in shaping the Englishness of the future.

A different approach will start a respect for English identity while working to tackle the more challenging issues.

An increasingly inclusive Englishness

On immigration, it seems that the real fear is of a system out of control. (The Leave vote was highest where the change has been fastest, not where the migration is highest). Labour does not need to adopt Ukip’s language about migrants, but to show it can manage migration fairly. Some reject all migration, a small minority favour genuinely open borders. Most people want something between the two.

A fifth of the population think you must be white to be English (an assumption sometimes shared by ethnic minorities). That’s high enough to be uncomfortable, but it is a minority view nonetheless and one that declines sharply amongst younger people. Time will gradually resolve this issue. Still, the left can help by not reinforcing the stereotype. It is wrong to characterise all English voters as white and working class; there are plenty of non-white English whose voices must be heard.

Three quarters see a non-white person with a local accent as English, falling to 45 per cent for non-white people as a whole. This may also be uncomfortable, but listen to the accents in any school playground and you will know the problem will not be around for long. Local integration strategies that embrace an inclusive English identity can move things forward.

The symbols of Englishness can and must be fought for. At the time of Euro '16, two-thirds of Muslims said that they saw the St George cross as a unifying symbol. It is not the automatically toxic icon that many on the left assume, though drop our guard and the far right will try to take it back.

Progressive, patriotic and English

There's a lot to build on. English people don't generally hold right-wing views on many economic and social policy issues. Time and new generations will bring more diversity into Englishness. We can give history a shove by highlighting the many non-white English people and their acceptance by younger generations. Instead of excluding people who are proud to be English, we have to tell the progressive and patriotic story of England that is embedded in Labour's hope for radical change.

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