

REVIEW: IDENTITY BRIEFINGS

Brian Taylor

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There are few things more guaranteed to try the soul than an academic treatise which opens thus: 'Let us begin by reviewing the extant literature.' You know, you just know that you are in for a slow-grinding trauchle through endless references, relevant and irrelevant, before getting to the substance. It is a little like the eager young advocate, determined to demonstrate his encyclopaedic knowledge of the law in court. He quotes statute, he cites cases, he calls Roman jurists in aid, all the while failing to notice that the judge, yearning for the comforts of the New Club, is growing increasingly irritated. Result: case dismissed with costs.

Of course, I exaggerate, wickedly. It can be valuable to compare and contrast new findings with what has gone before. However, sometimes one feels that the citations are part of a membership ritual: obscure references, albeit familiar to the initiated, which demonstrate the author's insider status. Equally, I should say that I have seldom witnessed such interpersonal rivalry as is frequently on display at academic conferences. My experience, I confess, is largely limited to discussions on politics, governance and psephology. Even within that confined ambit, however, the bitching can be top grade. Perhaps sometimes the written citations reflect that facet: a prolonged, textual sneer at rivals.

So it was a refreshing change to dip into the **Identity Briefings** generated by Edinburgh University's Institute of Governance as part of its comprehensive research programme on Constitutional Change and Identity. This is bite-size

Brian Taylor is political editor of BBC Scotland.

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academia, each paper just four sides of A4. It is a buffet of scattered tasty morsels: digital dissertations, with suggested online links to the full-scale, underlying research. It is, mostly, citation free. Self-evidently, this approach has its limitations. Bullet points will never satisfy every question raised in the mind of the inquisitive reader. The phrase ‘ah, but’ will spring fairly readily to the lips as one browses. However, I found this melange mostly fascinating: a blend of the familiar, the challenging, the intriguing and, occasionally, the irksome. Hopefully, too, its very accessibility may encourage new readers to ponder the issue of identity in post-devolution Scotland and beyond.

To the substance, then, and here I feel constrained to match the episodic nature of the content with a snacking review, working my way down the buffet line and pausing to sample as I go. Familiar as I am with the multi-layered nature of identity in Scotland, it was nonetheless intriguing to see these findings displayed alongside an examination of cross-border views, contrasting the shades of opinion here in Scotland with those in England. For example, Briefing One examines the notions of birth, blood and belonging – and, in particular, the concept of ‘becoming Scottish’ by deliberate choice or longevity of residence. The authors note that Scottish nationals generally view being born in Scotland as the key to identity, regarding as outmoded any concept of ancestral blood links. Equally, though, they found it hard to accept that someone born outside Scotland, for example in England, could assume Scots identity.

Briefing Two extends that concept, noting that English migrants had been inclined, before arriving in Scotland, to use ‘British’ and ‘English’ interchangeably – while their new Scots neighbours could not understand why the incomers did not stress Englishness, as they themselves stressed Scottishness. Most valuably, the authors are not content to leave the matter in the zone of description and analysis. They offer guidance for public policy. Firstly, they note that ‘common understandings of Britishness have so little resonance in Scotland that nationals reject it as a poor representation of themselves.’ Further, they extrapolate from that to suggest that Westminster Government efforts to inculcate a sense of Britishness among entrants to the UK may be ‘deeply misplaced’, given the intrinsically uncertain nature of that form of identity.

Yet more. Briefing Three reminds us that being Scottish is far more salient than being English in England or, indeed, Welsh in Wales. Briefing Four notes, with commendable understatement, that ‘being born in England seems to be a

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significant barrier to receiving a sympathetic response to any claim to be Scottish.’ Briefing Seven stresses that people in England ‘generally hold positive attitudes towards Scotland and the Scots’ – which may serve to comfort the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Briefing Eight, which I found fascinating, examines the Scots in England, noting that they frequently discovered, on revisiting Scotland, that they had unconsciously assimilated English values – but that the second generation, their daughters but especially their sons, often sought to emphasise their Scottish links. There are interesting studies, too, on the role of the media, on identity in the workplace and other issues. By now, of course, you can hear the ‘ah, but’ coming. The moment has arrived to pick a few nits, to query a few statements. (I have learned well from my academic counterparts.)

Firstly, I was a little – I stress, only a little – quizzical about the relatively fixed assumptions which permeate the work. For example, Briefing Four deals with ‘being and becoming Scottish’. It bases its analysis on extensive findings in the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. The object was to discover to what extent someone can become Scottish if they are not born here. It was, in the first instance at least, an arithmetical exercise, designed to measure a social trend. Yet the authors preface one finding with the phrase ‘more positively’ – and a counterbalancing finding with ‘less positively’. Value judgements, both.

In Briefing Seventeen, we are confronted with the issue of Newspapers and national identity in the devolved UK. The authors note that a trend is growing whereby the Scots are getting predominantly Scottish news because of editorialising and story selection while the English are getting predominantly English news. They argue, without expanding upon the point, that this is ‘probably unhealthy from the perspective of a developing and mature public debate.’ Well, up to a point, Lord Copper. I believe that newspapers in England were always offering an English perspective. They simply called it British. Further, I believe – and the authors acknowledge this – that the Scottish editions of the Fleet Street papers deal with Scottish matters for market-driven reasons. Such content sells better. I do not believe there is anything intrinsically parochial or ‘unhealthy’ about this, a priori. I believe, indeed, that such a view may derive, unconsciously, from a long-ingrained sense that London news is inherently more significant. Alternatively, one might argue that a healthy debate on public policy in Scotland would be rooted firmly on the Scottish ground, drawing evidence, information and advice from England, the EU, the US and further afield. Far from becoming parochial,

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Scotland has a chance to lift her head from her customary south-facing view – and see the wider world, while never neglecting the value of sharing intelligence with our nearest neighbour.

However, I stress again that I was only a little irked by the sense of a presumed world view, against which the findings were intuitively measured. Most of the presumptions – inclusion is a good thing etc – are endearingly, familiarly and understandably liberal. I draw attention to them purely from habit: my customary function of being a nuisance. They do not vitiate the overall work.

What, then, of other points? I was particularly impressed by Briefing Five, dealing with the potential use of identity in economic promotion. The authors note that ‘enduringly positive features of identity can be re-employed in a contemporary context.’ They offer four tools for reshaping the face we present to the world: reiteration, recapture, reinvention and repudiation. I found this a persuasive case for Scotland redeploying its established image – tartan and the rest – to grab initial attention, while then diverting eyes to our modern economic pitch.

I was rather less impressed by Numbers Ten and Eleven, drawn from an anthropological study of the attitudes among staff in Ninewells Hospital, Dundee. It seemed to me that the author made rather too much of remarks which, to me, were casual. There was, in short, less to them than met the eye. Such a tendency produced statements such as: ‘One feels most nationalistic, say, and lives out one’s national identity when playing football or singing ballads or making love.’ Not, I trust, all at the same time.

However, enough carping. These bite-size bulletins are a useful and accessible contribution to a fascinating debate: who are the Scots?

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