PROUD TO BE BRITISH

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What social surveys tell us about patriotism today.

This week's celebration of the fortieth anniversary of D-Day is a pointed reminder of how ideas about patriotism change. Nearly every Briton who lived through those days is proud of the contribution that the country made to the defeat of Hitler. Yet today, many people feel uneasy when politicians evoke patriotic emotions to justify the threat of force.

The patriotic rhetoric of Shakespeare no longer reflects the sentiments of the intellectuals and writers of England, a tribe sans patrie. Rupert Brooke's hymn to "some corner of a foreign field" that is made "for ever England" by the body of a dead soldier, is rejected as deluded or dangerous. When the subject of patriotism is mentioned, it is in Dr Johnson's sense: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

But what do ordinary British people think about their country? Do the sentiments of left-wing playwrights or of right-wing newspaper proprietors more nearly reflect their views? Since patriotism is a fundamental political value, it was included in a major international survey originated by the European Value System Study Group, and conducted in Britain by the Gallup Poll. The survey has covered more than a dozen countries, including the United States and Japan. The values survey adopted a straightforward approach to the measurement of patriotic sentiment, asking each respondent: How proud are you to be British? Avoiding abstract theoretical terms reduced the proportion of Don't Knows to 3 per cent.

Patriotism is a value that unites the British people. 86 per cent say that they are proud to be British. They differ only in the strength of their pride. An absolute majority, 55 per cent, give three cheers: they are very proud to be British. Another 31 per cent give two cheers: they are quite proud to be British. By contrast, only 8 per cent say that they are not very proud to be British, and only 3 per cent that they are not at all proud. Pride in Britain is a cause of popular support for the Falklands war, not a consequence of victory. This is shown by the fact that the values survey was undertaken in 1981, before the war in the South Atlantic.

Notwithstanding the widespread media publicity given to national criticism and disillusionment in the 1960s and 1970s, national pride is widespread. The average respondent is not a child of Imperial England, but the product of a postwar secondary modern school education, who entered adulthood when Britain's decline in the world was already evident, and Harold Macmillan, himself a valiant soldier in the first world war, was promoting his "you've never had it so good" materialist values, rather than the priceless value of patriotism.

Pride in country is not found everywhere; it reflects national history. Britons are proud of Britain because of what it has done; citizens of some other countries are not proud of their country—again because of what it has done. Comparison with values surveys in other countries demonstrates this.

Of the nations surveyed, pride is highest in the United States. Generations of preaching and teaching immigrants' offspring to hold their heads high and say, "I am an American," result in 96 per cent expressing patriotism, and four fifths saying that they are very proud to be an American. In Ireland, a 20th century revolution for national independence has resulted in 91 per cent of people in the Republic of Ireland saying that they are proud to be Irish, of whom two thirds are very proud to be Irish.

At the other extreme, the citizens of the chief Axis powers in the second world war are least proud of their country. In West Germany, 19th century nationalism has been supplanted by guilt for the Third Reich. There, only 21 per cent say they are very proud to be German, and 39 per cent quite proud, 29 per cent say they are not proud to be German. In Japan, 62 per cent express national pride, as against 31 per cent saying they are not proud to be Japanese.

Because national pride is so widespread in Britain, it is normal in the literal sense; that is, it is the norm to which nearly everyone conforms. The social science practice of identifying social groups that are most and least proud can be misleading here. Whether one looks at the middle class or the working class, among the young or the old, among English, Scots or Welshmen, or among Protestants or Catholics, the average person in each group is proud to be British.

The generation change

Generation is the single biggest influence on patriotic attitudes in Britain. Among people born during or before the first world war, 95 per cent are proud to be British, and 83 per cent very proud. In the interwar generation, the proportion who are very proud drops to 63 per cent, and in the generation born since the second world war, to 42 per cent. But that does not mean a rise in national self-rejection. In the youngest generation, four fifths remain proud to be British. They differ from their elders only in being more likely to give two, rather than three, cheers for their country.

National pride is the psychological hinge that joins an individual's personal identity with a larger public identity. The distinction between self and nation is dissolved in wartime. The fact that the second world war threatened death did not cause Britons to put self-preservation first. Instead, hundreds of thousands of people sacrificed their lives in a battle for national preservation. Simultaneously, millions of German and Russian lives were being lost in battles where soldiers in other lands had linked their lives to other causes.

The second world war is a reminder that patriotism can have destructive consequences. Studies of

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the conditions under which troops maintained their fighting morale found that, as Edmund Burke hypothesised two centuries ago, they were fighting first of all for the little platoon—for their immediate mates—more than for remote abstractions.

Because the values survey was interested in personal relationships with family and friends, and self-esteem and security, it is possible to test whether people who are patriotic substitute love of country for a lack of affection in conventional face-to-face social relationships. Is patriotism a symptom of neurosis, as was often hypothesised in studies of Nazi Germany, or is it a sign that people have integrated their personal and national identity?

While conventional sample surveys cannot probe individual psyches as deeply as a psychoanalyst, they can provide evidence based upon a nationwide cross-section of the population, rather than a sample of Hampstead deviants. Moreover, a nationwide sample survey can produce more reliable information than interpretations developed by analysts whose professional skill is in drawing a long chain of inference from a small number of impressions.

The values survey consistently finds that British people are satisfied with most of their social relationships, and that those who are best integrated socially are also most likely to be proud of their country. Among the majority who say that they are very satisfied with their home life, 89 per cent are proud of being British. Among the 4 per cent who say they are dissatisfied with their home life, 67 per cent express pride in their country.

In Britain, national pride appears doubly secure. Not only is it based on individuals identifying positively with relatively abstract patriotic symbols, but it is also reinforced by individual integration with family, friends and neighbours. Just as individuals seek satisfaction in their immediate social relationships, so too they are disposed to take pride in the larger national community of which they are a small part.

Consensus gives politicians clear guidelines. Don't attack British troops when they are in action is a maxim that almost every front-bench politician would accept. No party that is identified as anti-British can hope to win an election. As Denis Healey and Neil Kinnock learned in the 1983 election campaign, it is difficult to maintain the distinction between attacking how politicians handle military operations and attacking the actions of troops in the field. Hugh Gaitskell also stumbled on this problem during the 1956 Suez war. By contrast, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan were ready to propound national interests just as much as Conservatives, even if they sometimes defined interests differently from Tories.

Within the Labour Party, there is no mass support for anything deemed unpatriotic. The values survey found only a 14 per cent difference in the level of pride among those who identified with Labour, as against the Conservative Party. Among those who placed themselves on the far left, 76 per cent said they were proud to be British. Patriotism is not the exclusive property of the right and centre. It can also be found among Little Englanders such as Michael Foot.

The reason why there often appears to be disensus about patriotism is indicated in the values survey. Those who are not proud of Britain, while a small proportion of the national population, are nonetheless likely to get disproportionate prominence. Novelty makes news, and people who attack Britain are, by definition, saying something atypical.

Those who are not proud of being British are more likely to belong to the talking classes. They are younger, more educated, and more likely to speak out about public issues. Among the minority not proud of their country, 57 per cent say that they try to persuade friends of their views, as against 36 per cent of those who are very proud to be British. Moreover, those who are not proud of being British are more likely to put their feet where their hearts are, taking to the streets to protest about political matters. Those who are very proud of being British are a relatively silent and passive majority. Those not proud are three times more likely to take part in lawful demonstrations than those who are very proud, and four times more likely to endorse illegal protest actions. There are enough people who are not proud of being British to lift Trafalgar Square or look impressive in a television news report of a protest march. But at the ballot box, their numbers are small.

The patriotic majority are not a bellicose majority. The values survey asked people whether they would be willing to fight for their country, the conventional "blood and glory" view of patriotism. In Britain, 27 per cent bluntly said No and another 11 per cent said they were not sure. The 62 per cent who said that they would fight is less than the United States, where patriotism and military strength are a more potent political combination, but far higher than in Japan, West Germany, Italy and France, where people who have taken up arms have had to lay them down in defeat.

Conciliation, rather than coercion, is the preferred mode of political action among all the nations sur-
Falklands, and 53 per cent thought it not worth spending hundreds of millions of pounds a year to keep the Falklands in British hands. Negotiation, not entrenching a South Atlantic fortress, is the preferred alternative; 65 per cent considered it sensible to try to agree the future of the Falklands with Argentina, as against 26 per cent opposing negotiations.

The distinctive feature of Britain today is not the continuing evidence of pride in the country: this occurs in many countries. It is the objective change in Britain's international position. In smaller European democracies, people express pride in being Dutch or Danish or Norwegian without any thought of international power. In Britain, national pride developed when Britain was a world power.

Britain is no longer the world power it was in 1940, when it stood alone against Nazism, or in 1944 when it shared with America the responsibility for D-day. However, it is not a small, unimportant nation on the world stage; it is an important country that is becoming increasingly less important.

The majority of English people know that their country isn't what it used to be. This is not a source of shame and most even welcome this. The nations that most Britons want to emulate are small neutral countries, not world military powers. In 1971, the Gallup Poll found that 43 per cent said they wanted Britain to be more like Sweden or Switzerland, as against 38 per cent preferring a world role.

After Mrs Thatcher's landslide victory at the 1983 general election, the Gallup Poll found opinion had shifted—but not in the direction the election result implied. Today, an absolute majority of Britons (53 per cent) say they would like to see the country be like Sweden or Switzerland; this is a 20 per cent lead over those who long for world power status. Little England can induce as much pride in nation as a Great Britain.

veyed. The values survey asked people to choose between three alternatives which, one hopes, sounded better in the original French-language questionnaire than in English: changing society radically by revolutionary action; changing society gradually by reform; and defending society valiantly against all subversive forces.

The reformist alternative was endorsed by two thirds of those proud to be British as well as by two thirds not proud to be British. Only 22 per cent saw themselves as valiantly defending the country against subversion, a lower proportion than in Germany. And only 4 per cent spoke in favour of revolutionary action, a lower proportion than in Italy or France. The middle-of-the-road British attitude toward change has been consistent for years, according to evidence of the periodic European Commission Euro-barometer surveys.

Popular reaction to the 1982 Falklands war demonstrates that patriotism when a war is on is not a symptom of persisting bellicosity. While troops were in action, more than three-quarters of the population expressed approval for this response to the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. Pacifism—or a boundless trust in diplomatic negotiations or United Nations mediation—is not characteristic of the man in the street, any more than it is of the woman in Downing Street.

But a year after the war was won, the Gallup Poll asked people what they thought should be done next. In these circumstances, popular opinion was different. A total of 69 per cent told a Gallup Poll there was no point now in raking over events in the