Introduction

It seems reasonable to assume that anyone who picks up this book does so because they are interested in understanding national identity. After all, that is the title of the book, and our purpose in writing it is to explain our approach to national identity and present the empirical evidence which has led us to understand it in the way we do. We must make it clear right from the outset that the book is *not* centrally, or even largely, concerned with constitutional change. We are well aware that to some people it seems self-evident that the two must be inextricably entwined. The way political events in the United Kingdom have been reported since devolution in 1999 and the tendency in the media to assume a strong association between national identity and matters of governance has served to encourage that belief. The book will appear relatively soon after the referendum on Scottish independence held in September 2014, which is why we wish right at the outset to say that it is not about the referendum, and after this Introduction that momentous event will largely disappear from view in these pages. There are two reasons for this. Our intellectual focus over twenty years has been on various aspects of national identity. We do, of course, have our views, both personal and intellectual, about constitutional change, but that is not what our empirical research has been about, and this book is concerned with that research. Second, the connection between national identity and people's political and constitutional preferences is considerably looser than one might expect. We do not want to mislead the reader, so it is necessary to emphasise that the title of the book accurately describes its contents, which is at it should be.

How did we first become interested in national identity? Truth to tell, it is impossible to say. One of us has lived in Scotland for all of his life and the other for most of it. If you do that, national identity is pervasive and yet implicit. We are fond of a comment by the novelist Willie McIlvanney that 'having a national identity is a bit like having an old insurance policy. You know you've got one somewhere

but often you're not entirely sure where it is. And if you're honest, you would have to admit you're pretty vague about what the small print means' (*Glasgow Herald*, 6 March 1999). We began using that comment because it captures the ubiquity of national identity, as well as its imprecision and flexibility; the fact that it is part of the culture, up for grabs, and yet negotiable. This is not, however, simply a book about Scotland, but about national identity in Scotland and England, because you cannot understand the one without the other, and in any case, all forms of social identity involve an 'other', whether explicitly or implicitly.

We are sociologists, and interpret the social world in that way even if our observations and analysis of that world are influenced by other social sciences. We also take a specific sociological view of national identity. As we see it there is such a thing as 'society', but, despite the constraints of social structure, people are remarkably good at making sense of who they are for themselves, and acting on that basis. That, certainly, is one of the most important things we have learned from carrying out empirical research on national identity over twenty years. We have listed in the Appendix the key publications from a series of research projects and programmes so that the reader can, if they so wish, follow how our ideas and techniques developed. These publications, mostly in academic journals, set out the methodology and analytical techniques we have used and refined over the years in greater detail, especially statistical detail, than is appropriate in book form. Here, we have focused on giving the broader picture, on setting our results in a wider context. Looking at national identities in Scotland and England has implications going well beyond these islands, and because we live in a situation where 'national identity' and 'citizenship' are not commensurate with each other, this comparison provides an opportunity for a revealing and powerful research design.

We began exploring national identity in the early 1990s with a study of landed and arts elites in Scotland. We focused especially on 'incomers' holding positions which gave them some control over important aspects of the society into which they had come. They were confronted with claims that by virtue of being incomers they were poorly placed to understand that society. If McIlvanney was correct in saying that most people, notably 'natives' born and living in the country, are pretty vague about the small print of what national identity means, then 'incomers' often have to face claims that they are not 'one of us'.

We found that the study of such 'paradoxical people' gave us valuable insights into processes of national identification, and so, we argued, would the study of 'debatable lands', places in which national identities were ambiguous or multiplicitous. We followed up our 'elites' study with one of Berwick-upon-Tweed on the Scottish–English border, a town which had changed hands fourteen times in its medieval history, but which is still a place of ambiguity. There then followed two major programmes (from 1999 until 2011) around the theme of national identity, nationalism and constitutional change. They were funded by The Leverhulme Trust, without whose considerable financial support the research would not have been done and this book would never have been written. The presenting opportunity was afforded by 'devolution', the setting up of a parliament in Scotland in 1999 (and assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland) which raised the profile of debates about national identities in these islands. As we have already mentioned, ours was not a study of 'constitutional politics', but we took advantage of the opportunity to 'get at' national identities in Scotland and in England. (We had neither the resources, nor the expertise, to study Wales and Northern Ireland.) The first programme involved a connected series of studies in which we worked with social psychologists, political scientists and social anthropologists; the second was an extended and novel series of surveys investigating aspects of 'national identity' quantitatively.

When it came to writing up this account of twenty years' research on national identity, we were confronted with our own equivalent of the 'elephant in the room', namely the referendum on Scottish independence held on 18 September 2014. This Introduction is being written after the referendum; the rest of the book went to press in late July 2014. While we touch on the issue here and there, let us repeat just once more that this book has relatively little to say about constitutional change. It follows that it is emphatically not a book about that referendum, even less the story of how it came about in the first place, nor indeed, its possible consequences.[1] Nevertheless, now that the people of Scotland have decided, it would be remiss to make no reference in this Introduction to the outcome and any impact it may have on national identity. Writing this immediately after the referendum, it

[1] For a perceptive assessment of the context and outcomes of the referendum, see Paterson (2015).

is already clear that although Scotland will not become an independent country in the next few years, the constitutional structure of the United Kingdom will change in ways which at present are neither clear nor predictable.

We mentioned earlier that it is not always appreciated that the connection between national identity and people's political and constitutional preferences is considerably looser than one might expect. How people 'do' national identity is a complex process and is the central concern of this book; it affects but by no means determines their constitutional preferences. Nor did the association between national identity and constitutional change alter to any great extent as the referendum approached. The latest relevant survey data (from the 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey) show that while there are small variations, the relationship between national identity as usually measured and support for independence has remained broadly unchanged across the annual surveys between 2011 and 2014.

The obvious next question is whether the outcome of the referendum will change national identity in England or Scotland in the future. We could reasonably take refuge in the apocryphal reply of Zhou Enlai when asked what impact the French Revolution in the eighteenth century had on the Chinese one in the twentieth: that it is too soon to tell. At one level that is undoubtedly true. We are tempted by the usual academic mantra that more research is required and it will hopefully be done over the next few years. In its absence all we can do is make our own cautious predictions, and in the final chapters of the book, completed before the referendum, we discuss both the future of Britishness and of national identity. Writing this Introduction in its immediate aftermath, we anticipate that in Scotland not a great deal will change, though there may be a firming-up of the 'political' as opposed to the 'cultural' aspects of national identity, at least in the short term, influenced perhaps by the disputes over increased devolution which at the time of writing appear both inevitable and likely to be divisive. The future in England is rather harder to call. The promises of further devolution to Scotland which emerged in the closing stages of the referendum campaign were followed immediately afterwards by promises from the prime minister, David Cameron, of constitutional changes throughout these islands, most controversially in England where it is already clear that political consensus will be difficult, maybe even

impossible to achieve. Even so, we do not anticipate rapid and dramatic change in national identity because politics and national identity are not strongly associated. Thus conflict over, for instance, how 'English' matters are handled at Westminster, or how Scotland, and the other devolved territories, are funded may well be accompanied by appeals to Englishness or Britishness without actually changing how people feel about those identities.

We incline to the view that national identity in England and Scotland will change slowly, if at all, over the next decade. Events may cause temporary shifts in national identity, though these have been noticeable by their absence in the last twenty years. We are, however, sociologists and not soothsayers. It is important to bear in mind, then, that the future may not resemble the past, and that inevitably ours is a book about the recent past, though that past is, as always, the best guide to possible futures.

1 *Thinking about national identity*

What is it that is so interesting about national identity that it has intrigued us and dominated our research for some twenty years? Given what has already been published about nations, nationalism and national identity, why inflict yet another volume on readers? One reason is that a lot has been written about nationalism, a fair bit about 'nations', but far less about national identity. Consider this statement by the political philosopher Margaret Moore (2006: 98), in a handbook on nations and nationalism:

> It would not be devastatingly dislocational, in a cultural sense, to leave Canada and live in the United States, or to leave Scotland to live in England, and would not involve the traditional costs involved in learning a new language or new symbolic repertoires. But it may be profoundly difficult for the Scot to think of herself as an Englishwoman, or the Canadian to think of himself as an American.

It seems reasonable to accept Moore's premise that it would be fairly straightforward to adjust to the new way of life, but is it more debatable that it would be 'profoundly difficult' to acquire a new 'identity'? One might of course believe that what people choose to call themselves is neither here nor there, that national identity does not really matter. We think that it does matter, and that Moore is right in her surmise. It may well be that in the two examples she gives the migrant's behaviour does not actually change very much, because so much of the new life and its meanings are familiar. How people identify themselves in national terms is another matter entirely. We know, for example, from interviews with Scots who migrate to England, and English-born people who come to live in Scotland, that their country of origin, where they were born and brought up, confers on them a powerful sense of who they are. Sometimes they did not fully appreciate just how much national identity meant to them until they went to

live in another country. The sceptic may retort that this is simply sentiment, a hangover of early socialisation, and that it is a residue with little behavioural or even attitudinal force. This view is hard to defend in the light of the evidence.

In this chapter, we will ask: What is sociologically interesting about national identity? This then involves a further series of questions. Does sociology have a particular 'take' on national identity, compared, let us say, with politics, or anthropology or psychology and is it amenable to empirical enquiry as opposed to theoretical discourse? If Michael Billig (1995) is correct when he says that national identity is 'banal' in the sense that it is taken for granted, how can we ever discover what people mean by it as they go about their daily lives? Possibly national identity simply involves *not* being something? In other words, it is less about *what* you are than *who* you are not? Is national identity simply a label, an empty box, which defines what is outside, rather than its contents?

In this book, we will try to show that national identity really matters; not simply as a badge which we are given at birth and which we carry throughout our lives, like it or not. After all, none of us chose where we were born, and it is highly likely that our parents did not give it much serious thought either. There are a few people who feel so strongly about their national identity that they go to great lengths to have their babies in the 'homeland', but they seem the exception. There are also instances of people born in the 'wrong place', because they were visiting somewhere and events caught up with them, or because the appropriate hospital lay on the 'other' side of the border. When we did research in the English town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, which lies a few miles south of the England–Scotland border, we came across people who, usually as a result of medical complications, were taken to Scottish hospitals for their birth. That hardly seems significant, although when we spoke to them, they spoke of having their legs pulled by family and friends because they were 'Scots', at least by birth. It may be something of a joke, but jokes often reveal an underlying and sometimes uncomfortable truth.

Let us return to Margaret Moore's example. The Canadian may make a living south of the 42nd parallel, but continue to think of herself as Canadian, seeking out cultural news from back home, even celebrating differences as and when they arise, and possibly being a bit irritated when he is taken for an American. Such Canadians may,

for example, delight if someone can spot the differences between Canadian and American accents. They may find that when travelling in Europe, being 'not-American' but Canadian attracts less hostility. Students (even Americans) have told us that, when studying in the UK, sewing a Maple Leaf flag on your backpack improves your reception and even guarantees you more hitch-hiking lifts on the road. Similarly, many Scots have discovered that showing a SCO or ALBA sticker on their car leads to less aggression from French drivers than the legal GB sticker. Other people may regard national identity as a simple synonym of *citizenship*, reflected in having a passport. Though the US government does not really approve, American citizens can hold passports of other countries, but still require a US one to leave and enter the country. The passport may then be taken as a symbol of 'national identity' *tout court*, but it is by no means the same thing, even when the term 'nationality' is thrown into the equation. What, for example, do you write on the hotel register when it asks for your nationality? Do you treat it as equivalent to citizenship, or do you purposefully write down what *you* see as your 'national identity'?

If you think of yourself as a Scot, you are more likely to write down 'Scottish', although if the register specifies 'passport', you'll probably answer 'British', just to be on the safe side. And even if you think of yourself as 'English' you may put down 'British' because you think they are synonyms, though there does seem to be a rising awareness that 'English' is simply one, though numerically dominant, variant of British. To return to our Canadian example: if you think of yourself as Québecois you may have something of a dilemma. Quebec may be your homeland, and you may either think of it as part of Canada, even a very important part and say you are both Canadian and Québecois; or you may, in the parlance, say you are Québecois and not Canadian, which has its parallels in those who say they are Scottish and not British. To be sure, you can always say that because you have a Canadian or British passport whether you like it or not, that's what you have to be, but if you had a choice, you'd put down Québecois or Scottish.[1] In truth, it may not matter very much, because it is rare that hotel registers have the force of law. It is not a matter of life or

[1] We included such a question in the 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, and found that only 25 per cent of Scots would opt for a British passport if they were given the choice, whereas two-thirds would choose a Scottish one.

death. It does, though, give us an inkling that national identity is not a straightforward matter.

Could it be of real significance? There are many examples where your life may depend on how you describe yourself: Tamil or Sri Lankan; Tutsi or Rwandan; Tibetan or Chinese. We are fortunate in this corner of Europe that our life chances, indeed our life prospects, do not depend overmuch on how we choose to describe our national identity. Yet there are apparent anomalies. Many, perhaps most, states contain different 'nationalities', groups with distinct national identities: the UK (Scots, Welsh, (Northern) Irish); Spain (Catalans, Basques, Galicians); Italy (Sardinians); France (Bretons, Corsicans); Belgium (Flemish and Walloons). When we look closely, there are few states which fit the bill of containing single nationalities; which are genuine nation-states.[2] Here, then, we uncover a puzzle: what exactly is meant by national identity if it is not simply – or even – being a citizen of a state and bearing its passport?

National identity: the weakest link?

Surely, the reader might ask, hasn't this puzzle been solved already? Can't we find the answer in the existing literature? The odd thing is that, as we said earlier, despite everything written about nations and nationalism, national identity is the underdeveloped offspring of these muscular parents. Let us take two examples, the first by the doyen of nationalism studies, Anthony Smith, who wrote a book called *National Identity* back in 1991. He begins by pointing out that 'nationalism, the ideology and the movement, must be closely related to national identity, a multi-dimensional concept, and extended to include a specific language, sentiment and symbolism' (1991: vii). Smith goes on to define the fundamental features of national identity as: an historic territory or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties; and a common economy with territorial mobility for its members (1991: 14). He says 'a nation [sic] can therefore be defined as a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and

[2] Possibly Iceland and the Scandinavian countries qualify but the Saami pose a query; Ireland is of course partitioned into North and South, and only the latter is a separate state.

historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (1991: 14). In other words, he shifts ground to equate 'nation' with 'national identity'. To be sure, Smith does not equate national identity with 'citizenship'; he appreciates that the nation need not be the state, but his account does not make it clear how one distinguishes nation from national identity or indeed whether they are really distinct. He comments: 'a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture' (1991: 17). National identity is a mechanism for giving people a sense of individual and collective worth, without which they cannot function. He spells this out at length more explicitly in his concluding chapter:

> The primary function of national identity is to provide a strong 'community of history and destiny' to save people from personal oblivion and restore collective faith. To identify with the nation is to identify with more than a cause or a collectivity. It is to be offered personal renewal and dignity in and through national regeneration. It is to become part of a political 'super-family' that will restore to each of its constituent families their birthright and their former noble status, where now each is deprived of power and held in contempt. (1991: 161)

While perhaps he overstates the case, Smith's view, plainly, is that national identity is the means whereby people solve the need to belong, without which they suffer alienation and atomisation. It is a psychosocial mechanism which everyone needs if they are to function as members of society. National identity sutures people into the national community and gives them meaning and purpose beyond what they themselves can generate. This is the case, it seems, whether they like it or not, or whether they believe that their national identity is actually important to them. This is, fundamentally, a functionalist explanation; individuals need national identity to function as social beings, and the nation (possibly even the state) needs their identification with its symbols and institutions in order to exist. Like any functionalist explanation, however, it raises critical questions. What if you don't identify with the nation? How do we explain that many people seem to dissent, or identify with an alternative nation? If, in Benedict Anderson's celebrated term, the nation is an 'imagined community'