Tom Nairn: A student perspective

Ben Wellings

School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia

Correspondence
Ben Wellings, Monash University, School of Social Sciences, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.
Email: ben.wellings@monash.edu

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I first encountered Tom Nairn when I saw a copy of The Break-up of Britain (Nairn, 1977) at a friend’s house after my undergraduate degree had concluded in 1994. Unintentionally, nationalism was a constant theme of my undergraduate studies. These studies were conducted in England and France in the historic context of European integration and within the framework of the early years of the Erasmus scheme for mass student mobility. As someone studying contemporary political history with a touch of continental political philosophy, plus French and Italian thrown into that mix, Tom’s name kept cropping up in the books that I was reading. In other words, I knew of Tom’s ideas before I met Tom himself.

One of the ways in which I knew about Tom before meeting him was because there was a pen and ink caricature of him waving a saltire in a 1995 issue of the Times Higher Education Supplement. This article announced the launch of a new MSc in Nationalism Studies at Edinburgh University. It was this that encouraged me to abandon my plans to study nationalism in Quebec and move from Brighton on the south coast of England to study nationalism in Scotland. Thus, when I finally arrived (to my shame, late) to the first ever meeting of students in the MSc in Nationalism Studies and blustered in the door with all eyes on me, I recognised Tom from the drawing.

I have clear memories of this initial meeting. This was not least because I also met my wife, Shanti Sumartojo, at that meeting—I had a lot going on in that first class—but I remember Tom too. Tom was an important part of the initial years of the MSc. David McCrone had been the prime mover in setting up the degree (and having now worked in universities for two decades, I have an appreciation of the work involved in this—thank you, David). Tom was quieter than David in the first meeting, but he had a presence conveyed through silences.

As far as teaching was concerned, Tom’s role was to create and lead classes that would integrate some of the other social science perspectives on nationalism that were part of the wider degree. These classes also involved PhD students, notably Ailsa Henderson, and were a joy to be part of. They were usually followed by a liquid lunch down on the Cowgate, and when he could, Tom would join us. This meant that Thursday afternoons were not the most productive of times from a purely words-on-page perspective. The ghost of John Knox would surely have disapproved of this high enjoyment, low work-rate combination. But what mattered was that Thursdays became an important point of contact and cohort-building between students from the US, Canada, Japan, the former Soviet Union and, of course, the United Kingdom.
The latter polity was an object of particular scorn for Tom. This was perhaps the most revealing—and challenging—part of Tom's perspective that he communicated during those classes. Tom gave a perspective on nationalism in general and Scottish nationalism in particular that many of the non-Scottish students had not encountered before. Having spent my formative years in Conservative parts of south-east England and then having imbibed the hidden curriculum of the Erasmus scheme, my perspective on nationalism when arriving in Edinburgh in October 1996 was that this was an idea best consigned to humanity's past and contained, in Europe at least, by the advances of regional integration. Events in Yugoslavia, the former-USSR and Rwanda added drive to the sense that understanding and controlling nationalism was a matter of historic urgency.

Of course, Tom was an early adopter of the idea that European integration might contain nationalism. But he went further and suggested that European integration might allow a positive flowering of small-state nationalism. He was sceptical of the idea that the emergence of nationalism at the end of the Cold War was somehow worse than the potential destruction of nuclear-armed great powers and their imperialist impulses. This scepticism was also directed towards cosmopolitan devotees of universal principles. For Tom, if you scratched a cosmopolitan, you usually found an imperialist underneath. These were difficult arguments to make in the 1990s, and they had already marked him out as an unorthodox thinker on the left of British politics before he taught at Edinburgh in the late 1990s.

This, however, was an insight that I gained from later research and discussion with colleagues (Wellings & Kenny, 2019). At the time, what stood out was the contrast between the acerbic tone of Tom's writing and the avuncular delivery of his spoken word. Tom's style was to ponder each word that emerged from his thought process. Ideas might form slowly, leaving students wondering, 'Where will this sentence end; or, having started, will it end at all?' Some students struggled with the historic sweep of his arguments and the way that his interpretation of nationalism was openly grounded in his own Scottishness, and hence his membership of one of the ‘small battalions’ (Nairn, 1997, pp. 133–175) in the world order. I remember driving around with him and his partner Millicent one dreich Sunday searching for the best fish and chips in Fife, which seemed to express something of Tom's philosophy—finding the best in what fate had delivered.

This acerbic critique was primarily directed at the institutions of Britishness. The first of these was the British state itself, or ‘Ukania’ as Tom liked to call it. Before teaching at Edinburgh, Tom had been working with Ernest Gellner at the Central European University, and Gellner's thought was ever-present, situating Edinburgh as part of the modernist school in the intellectual debate of the time. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was the ghost at the banquet in Tom's thinking and teaching about Britishness in the late 1990s. Austro-Marxist readings slipped onto the curriculum, and Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities (Musil, 1930 [953]) was mentioned frequently.

If the British state was seen as antiquated and senile, then a good deal of critique was directed at the institution that did the most to paper over the cracks in the polity: the monarchy. For Tom, the British monarchy was evidence of the missing nationalist revolution in British history. To reach this conclusion, he drew on Gramscian notions of passive revolution and hegemony. In his view, the monarchy existed where more authentic and democratic national polities ought to be. The monarchy provided ‘folklore from above’, leading to strange obsessions with royal weddings and the births of heirs. The former Princess of Wales' death in a car crash in August 1997 came in the last month of study for the first MSc cohort. News of this event was reported to me by a fellow student whilst I was writing my dissertation on English nationalism (I was at the point where I was arguing that the monarchy no longer had resonance in Britain, so this section had to be quietly deleted).

The British party system was another object of derision and was seen as particularly moribund. For Tom, the travails of John Major's Conservatism spoke for themselves, particularly in a Scotland that had not returned a Conservative majority since 1983. Devolution was on the horizon, and that came after New Labour's landslide of May 1997. But whilst being relieved at the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Tom was of the view that Tony Blair's modernising project was still ersatz nationalism from above. In time, he would be as critical of Gordon Brown's idea of Britishness as he had been of Thatcher's and Major's, as the former Labour Prime Minister noted in a tweet when Tom died.
These ideas that Tom brought to the classroom in that first year of the MSc in Nationalism Studies were contained in two books. The first was The Break-up of Britain. First published in 1977, it was very much of its time (one edition in the library even had a back-cover photo of the young author in a beret, much to the amusement of his current students). The other was The Enchanted Glass, from 1988 and republished in 1993. Both contained insightful analyses of nationalism as the ‘modern Janus’, or the role of the monarchy and state in Englishness. A third book, Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited was published towards the end of the first year of the MSc.

My engagement with the ideas in these books was shaped around the aforementioned dissertation, in my case on English nationalism. Meetings with Tom over the summer of 1997 allowed a genuine exchange between us on this topic. His approach to the potential for English nationalism to act as a force of democratic change in England had shifted since The Break-up of Britain and The Enchanted Glass. Although the Brexit-era expression of English nationalism seems closer to Tom's analysis of Enoch Powell’s Englishness in Break-up, in the late 1990s his views were closer to those of Anthony Barnett’s, sensing a potential for English nationalism as a vector of political change (Barnett, 2017).

As David McCrone has noted in his essay here, Tom was not a conventional academic. His writing and thinking had less of a profile in England than in Scotland. Nonetheless, echoes of his thinking can be found in subsequent research on Englishness, primarily Krishan Kumar’s analyses of English national identity. Although approaching Englishness and English nationhood from different perspectives, Arthur Aughey and Michael Kenny both engage with ideas prompted by Tom's work (Aughey, 2007; Kenny, 2014). Paul James’ early thinking about nationalism also critically engaged with Tom’s ideas (James, 1996).

Of course, my own work on English nationalism is heavily indebted to Tom’s thinking. In this way, it is a ‘Scottish’ interpretation of English nationalism, insisting that nationalism can and does have important political consequences rather than just being epiphenomenal. The idea I have advanced that Englishness and Britishness are merged owes a lot to Tom's post-New Labour analysis of Scotland’s ‘occluded nationalism’. One of my discussions with Tom led to me applying this concept to England and insisting that if it was true that Scottish nationalism was obscured by the institutions and symbols of the British state, then this was even more the case for England. Accordingly, I rated a footnote in After Britain (Nairn, 2000), which seemed like a major achievement for someone just starting their PhD.

Nicola Sturgeon referred to Tom as ‘one of the greatest thinkers, political theorists and intellectuals that Scotland has ever produced - and certainly one of the leading and most respected voices of civic nationalism’. Although committed to independence for Scotland, he remained outside of party politics. I wonder if he was saddened that he did not see Scotland become independent in his lifetime.

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