

CROSSBOW - The Bow Group magazine

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Christmas Under Assault?



**Matt D'Ancona
Daniel Hannan
Sayeeda Warsi**

**Simon Jenkins
David Willetts MP
Andrew Rosindell MP**

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Editor's Note



There are perhaps few aspects of the great Britishness debate that do not find some of their fullest expression at Christmas.

Britishness has become one of the biggest political band-wagons of the noughties. Every party is clamouring to claim the flag of national identity. Some say Gordon Brown favours the top-down approach, imagining that national identity should be state-distributed. So he tends to sweep aside small, local community ventures with a tide of centralisation and state-employment. In the barren wasteland that's left, it is tempting to imagine him planting Union-Jacks in our back gardens with 'Made in Whitehall' stamped unobtrusively on the back.

David Cameron seems to recognise that national identity is a bottom-up business; an organic and complex process, dependent on communities, individuality and local activity, which needs a rich soil to flourish. But whatever the case, it is hard to think of anything that strikes at the nerve-endings of our sense of history, tradition and identity as biting as Christmas.

Christmas – that time when our family, social and religious history and traditions

all come to the fore; for many of us, as surely as the annual surfacing of that dusty box of Christmas decorations which festoon our house for twenty-odd days each year. Families re-unite (with the inevitable ghosts of Christmas past and present) and even the churches fill to celebrate our national religion with all its trimmings.

But more and more, we find the papers peddling foreboding of Christmas Future: Stories of our old traditions and identity under threat from the new forces of commercialism or secularisation or multiculturalism - or just the plain fact that we're all just too busy to stop and care. According to a recent YouGov Poll, three quarters of us think the commercial Christmas starts too early. This year we learn that one in five schools did no nativity play; Town Halls replace Christmas with 'Winterval', and Christmas lights do not meet health and safety regulations so the streets stay dark.

But beyond the simplicity of the headlines, how does the traditional British Christmas – a celebration of the Christian story, (complete with message from the head of the Church of England, our Queen), fit with today's modern, multi-cultural, secularised Britain? Muslim Peer Baroness Warsi leaves us in no doubt as to the importance of a religious, Christian celebration of Christmas. Matt D'Ancona reaffirms the relevance of the Christmas message for public and politicians alike, while The National Secular Society call for a calming of what they term 'the panic of the pious'.

In this Christmas edition of Crossbow, we also look at other aspects of Britishness: From the devolution debate to the future

of the House of Lords, why Enoch was wrong, and whether the Oxford Union was upholding the pillars of Britishness in allowing Nick Griffin from the BNP and David Irving a floor to speak. We also announce the winner of the Bow Group's essay competition.

But I will leave you with the Christmas message I received from Muslim Cleric Iftikhar Ahmad.

"Being a Muslim I must believe in Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) and Moses (peace be upon him). Muslims feel pride in celebrating the feast of Ramadan and Day of Sacrifice, celebrating the sacrifice of Abraham (peace be upon him). Christians must celebrate Christmas. The majority of British population is Christian and all schools must celebrate Christmas. Followers of every religion celebrate their days of festival. Britain is a multi-religious society and every body has the right to celebrate their festivals and no body has to right to criticise others. We must learn to respect and tolerate others who are different; otherwise, there will be no peace and prosperity in the world."

The Britishness debate will rage on and on. Headlines will continue to proclaim that Christmas has been cancelled. But one thing stands out clearly – that tolerance, wisdom and respect, which are pillars of the Christian message, are at the heart of Britishness, and will never be outdated.

Have a Merry Christmas, and a very happy New Year.

**Charlotte Leslie - Editor, Crossbow
PPC for Bristol North West**

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The Cultivation of Christmas Trees

by T.S. Eliot

**There are several attitudes towards Christmas,
Some of which we may disregard:**

**The social, the torpid, the patently commercial,
The rowdy (the pubs being open till midnight),
And the childish -- which is not that of the child
For whom the candle is a star, and the gilded angel
Spreading its wings at the summit of the tree
Is not only a decoration, but an angel.**

The child wonders at the Christmas Tree:

**Let him continue in the spirit of wonder
At the Feast as an event not accepted as a pretext;
So that the glittering rapture, the amazement
Of the first-remembered Christmas Tree,
So that the surprises, delight in new possessions
(Each one with its peculiar and exciting smell),
The expectation of the goose or turkey
And the expected awe on its appearance,
So that the reverence and the gaiety
May not be forgotten in later experience,
In the bored habituation, the fatigue, the tedium,
The awareness of death, the consciousness of failure,
Or in the piety of the convert**

**Which may be tainted with a self-conceit
Displeasing to God and disrespectful to the children
(And here I remember also with gratitude
St. Lucy, her carol, and her crown of fire):**

**So that before the end, the eightieth Christmas
(By 'eightieth' meaning whichever is the last)
The accumulated memories of annual emotion
May be concentrated into a great joy
Which shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion
When fear came upon every soul:
Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
And the first coming of the second coming.**

T.S. Eliot

Don't cancel Christmas celebrate it!

by Baroness Warsi



Perhaps the most exhausting month of the year, I find December strangely reassuring. You know what you are going to get; Christmas trees, carols, angels, shopping fatigue, overspend on your credit card and now it seems, stories that "Christmas is cancelled".

The nativity play falls foul of the latest over zealous health and safety law and some well meaning council re-titles the season "Winterville." Or there is the change to the substance of the celebration to one that includes all faiths and none; with readings from the Bhagavad-Gita alongside "The God Delusion." But, now some left wing think tank has suggested we down grade Christmas for fear of offending religious minorities. Well, as a Muslim, I am only offended that a secular think tank should presume to know what offends me; so it was time to speak out.

But the equally predictable reaction to these stories, of denial or hysteria, obscures what is an interesting question; why should we keep Christmas? In a multi-cultural and religiously pluralistic society, why should we all "down tools" to celebrate, or at least recognise, a mono-confessional festival. Also obscured, is the negative and rarely asked question, why shouldn't we keep Christmas?

The claim that immigrant communities or religious minorities are offended is, as absurd, as saying that Protestants are offended by the word "mass" being referenced in Christmas. These

communities are notoriously more religious than those born in the UK and, as a British Muslim, let me clearly state that we approve of the public recognition of the sacred that is inherent in festivals such as Christmas. That a left wing think tank should say that I, and my community, think otherwise is deeply offensive and wrong. Further evidence for my view, is that the campaigns, such as they are, to down grade Christmas are rarely spearheaded or even supported by the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh community groups.

Also the packed out churches and chapels at this time of year surely indicate that the general non-church going population is not ambivalent, let alone, offended. Christmas may mean very different things to different people but who finds it exclusive or offensive.

But turning to the positive question, Christmas should be kept as it is one of the cultural ties that bind us and secondly it is an important barrier to the total commercialisation of our society.

The first reason may shock you and especially that I, as a Muslim, regard this season as a cultural tie. I am not meaning that being Christian is synonymous with being British, of course not. But we all live in a country that has a Christian heritage and it is these values that have informed the development of British culture, its laws and its institutions. Christmas is a time to recognise the contribution that Christianity has made (and continues to make) to the nation and reiterating the beliefs that informed the development of the nation is an important point of connection for all British people; even if one does not share the religion. Also, I believe that for too long, community cohesion or multi-culturalism has ignored the majority culture which still is Christian. Just as trying to forbid Muslims keeping Ramadan or celebrating Eid is offensive and will not assist community cohesion neither will the

dumbing down of the celebration of Christmas. We need to find what unites us as British and focus on that.

But secondly, as a Conservative who believes that the quality of your life is not merely ruled by economics; it is so important to keep the meaning of this holiday. In the current consumerist culture, I think that the church has a huge battle to get its message across. But I do hope that it does, because to do so would give the nation a focus on the poor, the oppressed, the hungry and the vulnerable rather than just on ourselves and our finances. The Christmas story, told well, is a rare opportunity to pause and think about the values and priorities in our lives.

Also, in today's busy world, where families live all over the country and the world, the meaning of Christmas and its focus on spirituality, would help many to realise that the effort, often huge, made to see ones family, at this time of year, is so important.

The long winter months need a holiday to look forward to and no think tank, left wing, or otherwise has suggested what else we would want to celebrate. So let us leave Christmas alone. In a nation with such rich Christian heritage it is appropriate that this celebration is Christian.

Why Enoch was wrong

by Nicholas Hillman

Enoch Powell holds a unique place in Conservative history. Officially, he was only ever a relatively minor player. His most important post was Minister of Health, a job he held for just over a year in the dying days of the Macmillan Government. Yet he is one of the few politicians who, like Winston and Maggie, are known by their first name only, and he is widely regarded as central to post-war Conservatism.

For historians and political commentators alike, this raises a conundrum. Just about everyone agrees that Powell helped to end the cosy post-war consensus: as such, he is partly responsible for Thatcherism and even New Labour. Yet, as the Conservative candidate Nigel Hastilow found in late 2007, it has become a sackable offence to claim 'Enoch was right'. Why?

The answer lies in a single speech on immigration that Powell made forty years ago, in April 1968, to Conservative activists in his home-patch of the West Midlands. To this day, the 'Rivers of Blood' speech remains the best-known address delivered by a British politician who is not the leader of their party. When the far right sell merchandise claiming 'Enoch was right', they do not mean he was right about the growth in the money supply – still less about gay sex or capital punishment (on which he was a liberal). They are referring to the Rivers of Blood speech and his lengthy campaign to end mass immigration.

But there is a fatal flaw in their Enoch-was-right argument: events have shown that Powell was fundamentally wrong about immigration and its impact on the UK.

Most significantly, he was wrong to foretell 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood.' Britain has had a number of race-related riots – for example, in Bristol in 1980, in Brixton and Toxteth in 1981 and in Handsworth in 1985. At the time, Powell said these justified his fears about the impact of mass

migration. Yet, while such violent episodes are a scar on British history, they were not solely about race, they generally had specific local causes and, even when lumped together, they do not comprise the sort of civil war that Powell had predicted.

Secondly, he was wrong to use such inflammatory rhetoric. Most parliamentarians receive racist letters and come into contact with racist members of the public, but others do not use them as the basis for their speeches. When Ted Heath sacked Powell for making the Rivers of Blood speech, he said: 'The reason I dismissed Mr Powell from the Shadow Cabinet was not for stating these policies. It was because of the way he did it.' Heath was right, because it is possible to talk about the pressures arising from mass migration without sinking to the language of the gutter. Powell failed this test, and opinion polls and anecdotal evidence suggest ill-feeling towards newcomers grew as a direct result of the Rivers of Blood speech.



Thirdly, he was wrong about policy. Powell argued that race-relations legislation would be counterproductive and he called for an end to most immigration. The British record on race

and migration is far from perfect – Labour's refusal to help the Kenyan Asians in 1968 and the Conservatives' vacillation over early race-relations legislation are particular low points. But the cross-party consensus in favour of controlled immigration backed up by legislation against racial discrimination has proved to be durable, and it is far more humane than Powell's harsh alternatives.

Finally, Powell was wrong about the people arriving in the UK. In November 1968, he said, 'The West Indian or Asian does not by being born in England become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact, he is a West Indian or Asian still.' British nationalism runs through Powell's career like a wick running through a candle. So it is ironic that a higher proportion of people with minority ethnic backgrounds consider themselves to be British than do white people.

British life gained from Powell's decision to enter Parliament and he helped to change the course of British politics for the better, but he dealt with immigration in the wrong way. It is right that this should remain as a stain on his political legacy.

Nicholas Hillman has written an article to mark the 40th anniversary of the Rivers of Blood speech for the spring 2008 edition of the academic journal *Patterns of Prejudice*.

Christmas Light

By Matthew D'Ancona

During Advent, my thoughts are turning once again to my friend and collaborator, Carsten Peter Thiede, who died suddenly just before Christmas three years ago. Carsten was not only one of the foremost New Testament scholars of his era and a true pioneer in ancient history. He was also a life force, whose enthusiasm, intellectual energy and gift for friendship were infectious.

In the two books we co-authored on early Christianity – and the television documentary programmes they spawned – I played agnostic hack to Carsten's religious scholar. I learned many things from him: he was a terrific teacher, especially if you were lucky enough to spend a day with him in an ancient city such as Jerusalem or Rome. But I especially recall his thoughts on Christmas, and its meaning. On this, as on so much else, he was an optimist.

It is fashionable now to say that Christmas has been hollowed out by commercialism and secularism. And there is, of course, some truth in this. "We've been given our parts in the nativity play," says one of Emma Thompson's children in *Love Actually*, "and I'm the lobster!" "The lobster?" asks Thompson. "In a nativity play?" "Yeah," replies her daughter. "First lobster." Her mother grows more puzzled: "There was more than one lobster present at the birth of Jesus?" The child is scornful: "Duh." I suspect there have been many such conversations in households across the land this festive season.

But Carsten was clear that we should not be ashamed to treat Christmas as a time of celebration, feasting and joy. As the Wise Men from the East – Babylonian Astronomers following Jupiter to the stable in Bethlehem – brought gifts to the baby Jesus, so we exchange presents with our loved ones. As the Holy Family and the shepherds would have enjoyed their lamb chops, bread and wine to mark the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, so we feast around

the family table on December 25. It is too glib to dismiss these annual gatherings as inherited pagan rites masquerading as Christian celebrations. They are an authentic observation of the true Christmas message.

The most striking thing about the Nativity story is its duality. There is festivity, generosity, bounty. But there is also darkness and hardship. With our carols, decorations and brightly-lit trees, we mark the capacity of the human spirit for joy. But that joy is surrounded by something dangerous and forbidding. Consider: the Gospel writers tell us about a family, two millennia ago, who battled through the winter to register for a census and then fled the horrific slaughter of the innocents. Around the glow of the crib, there is the blackest night. Renaissance iconography depicted the baby Jesus holding a bracelet made of thorns, a symbol of the terrible fate that awaited him on the Cross.

Yet – as every Nativity scene reminds us – the glow remains, bright and indomitable. Carsten's view, expressed in a piece for *The Sunday Telegraph* seven years ago, was that the light symbolised something very pertinent to our own age. "It is the glow of the family, its self-reliance and its unflinching determination in the face of the encroachments of a wicked State. What the Gospels tell us is that the family is, as it has always been, the only true fortress against the hostility and uncertainties of the world...Jesus, a child of uncertain parenthood to all but those with knowledge of divine revelation, survived childhood persecution precisely because Mary and Joseph were determined to remain a family."

I don't think my friend was trying to recruit the Evangelists to a revival of John Major's disastrous *Back to Basics* campaign. But his point was clear enough. If the theological significance of Christmas concerns the miracle of the Incarnation, its message for our lives

concerns children, their vulnerability and the awesome responsibility of parenthood.

In the special Christmas issue of *The Spectator*, my colleague Fraser Nelson reveals an astonishing statistic. If you remove immigrants from the calculation – newcomers tend to follow more traditional patterns of social behaviour – this year will be the first on record in which more than half of all children were born outside wedlock. Nobody can doubt the heroism of many lone parents. But – on practical rather than moralistic grounds – it should be clear that this trend is storing up disaster for the future. Iain Duncan Smith's remarkable work on our *Broken Society* has revealed a social landscape in which family breakdown, addiction, crime, debt and hopelessness are rife. He – and David Cameron – are right to put this crisis at the heart of the Conservative project.

This is the spur to individual conscience which survives at the heart of Christmas, and should be the serious underpinning to all our festivities. A child is born in Bethlehem, bringing joy to the world: eat, drink, and be merry – but reflect as well on the tasks that await us all in the year ahead. Yes, old friend: you were right.

Matthew d'Ancona is Editor of The Spectator



Panic among the pious

**is symptomatic of something much bigger says Terry Sanderson,
president, National Secular Society**

There is much being written and said at the moment about the resurgence of religion in the world. The American presidential race is saturated with it, the Middle East is in turmoil over it, Africa is dominated by it. But Europe seems curiously resistant to this rise in fervour. In Europe we are going in the opposite direction.

In just about every country in Europe (even those that still have a strong religious culture, such as Poland) there is an ongoing loss of adherence to the traditional religious structures. Church attendance has been falling all over the continent for decades and there is widespread indifference to the calls from the Vatican and Lambeth Palace for a revival in interest in the churches. As Europe liberalises – with the abandonment of traditional, religiously-inspired legislation on abortion and homosexuality even in places where the Catholic Church was once all-powerful such as Spain, Italy and Portugal – the panic among Christians becomes ever-more shrill.

This falling-off in interest in organised Christianity has coincided with a surge in Islam. Despite the fact that Muslims amount to only three or four per cent of the population in Britain, there is a popular perception that they are far greater in number than that. A few acts of terror have given the Islamic community an aura of great power, and Government efforts to appease the radicals by pouring money into the Muslim community can seem like capitulation to some people.

The Christian churches in Britain are in panic mode, particularly so at Christmas. It usually starts with a survey or an opinion poll. A Sunday paper revealed that – according to its research – only 20% of schools will be staging a traditional nativity play this year.

Fulminating bishops and outraged priests were quickly on the scene to complain that Christ is being taken out of Christmas. The well-rehearsed ecclesiastical monologue goes like this: "You can no longer celebrate Christmas as a Christian festival, it's been hijacked by the politically correct brigade. You have to say Seasons Greetings instead of Merry Christmas in case the Hindus object. It's just one big orgy of consumerism. People are aching for a relief from shopping and searching for spirituality. Where are the cards with a Christian theme? etc etc."

The National Secular Society then is called in to contradict all this. We try to explain that nativity plays have not been "banned" – that, in fact, many schools are doing no play at all. Others are choosing to do something different. This may be because they want to ensure that all their pupils can be equally included, whatever background they come from, and sometimes it is because they're all bored rigid of doing the same thing year after year and want something different.

Nothing will dissuade some sectors of the media being determined to report for their own reasons that nativity plays have been banned.

Last year, a survey was published by a firm that no-one had ever heard of, saying that 74% of workplaces would not be permitting Christmas decorations because it might offend those of other religions.

Immediately the cry went up and the political correctness monologue was spoken and the media reported that decorations were being banned wholesale around the country. No-one thought to check the veracity of this survey or how the results had been obtained.

I was called out by one local radio station after another to explain why decorations

were no longer permissible in the workplace. On every phone-in programme I asked listeners to please let me know if their workplace had been forbidden to put up tinsel and balloons. People rang in alright and the general drift was: "We've got decorations where I work, but it's disgraceful that other people can't have them."

My pleas for someone to come forward whose office or factory was devoid of deckies were unsuccessful, but everyone who rang in was convinced that such Scrooge-like employers did exist, somewhere. After all, it said so in the paper.

The whole basis of this survey was questionable, but no-one in the media challenged it and I have already seen this survey cited again this year in the Daily Telegraph as further proof of the destruction of Christmas.

And then we had a report by Theos bemoaning the level of knowledge about the intricacies of the Christmas story, but no publicity of course was given to the presumably embarrassing fact that only around a third of those describing themselves as regular churchgoers answered the four questions correctly.

Similarly there was the wail that there were no Christian stamps, but no one wanted to spoil their story by admitting that these are the theme on alternate years. This year has had its own stamp fallacy: that the Madonna and child stamp was only available on special request. This has been enthusiastically circulated by Christians for weeks and even being mentioned with wringing hands in a Commons debate on 5 December. But now after all the damage is done – surprise, surprise – it turns out to be a hoax.

And the Christianophobia debate – in which only about ten MPs took part – seemed to me to show signs of

schizophrenia. On the one hand there was horror expressed about how few religious Christmas cards there are, as if secularists are standing outside W H Smith threatening customers who dared to purchase any. It seems more plausible that there simply isn't the demand.

On the other was a kind of aggressive "We're the king of the castle and don't you forget it." This was contained in such statements as "That Christianity has a pre-eminent position in British life in comparison to other religions is not wrong. It is not a case of equality. Of course, the practice of all religions should be free, fair and equal, but that Christianity is pre-eminent is not through any attack on equality; it is an acknowledgment of its role in creating the tolerant, free and democratic society that we all enjoy." I was also troubled by reference to BNP Christmas cards, followed by a statement that "that illustrates the risk that if those in society who uphold Christian values are not prepared to do so openly and straightforwardly, others might do so in their place."

This may all sound trivial. What does it matter? It's just media flim-flam, isn't it?

Well, it does have its sinister side and this was brought home to me when I was asked this month on to GMTV to talk about the "ban" on nativity plays. I tried to explain that there was no ban, but the presenter wasn't listening. "The National Secular Society wants to scrap nativity plays so as not to offend immigrants" viewers were told (a complete fabrication on her part, we had said no such thing)

Within minutes of my appearance, 3,000 emails arrived at the studio, all with the same message: "If these foreigners don't like the way we do things, why don't they go back where they came from?"

Now, if 3,000 people took the trouble to write in, how many more were sitting at home fuming but not writing in? A few Muslims and Hindus contacted the programme saying: "We don't mind, honestly. We like Christmas". But the damage that these surveys do to race relations is immeasurable. I was deeply shocked by the level of racism that emerged from this experience and disheartened at how thin the veneer of tolerance really is.

The other aspect of this annual panic-mongering that annoys me intensely is the arrogant assumption by churches that there is something almost criminal about people celebrating Christmas in their own –sometimes non-religious – way. The fact is that British people are mainly indifferent to religion. Whatever they say to census-takers (72% claimed they were Christian in the last census), they are actually cultural Christians. When asked by pollsters "What is your religion" – the answer may well be "Christian" but what they're actually saying is "Not Muslim".

The resurgence of assertive Islam has driven people who were previously completely oblivious of their religious designation into suddenly finding it again. Because young Muslims are increasingly saying: "I am a Muslim first, last and completely. That is who I am", the cultural Christians suddenly find that they, too, have to assume a religious identity.

And this yearly Christmas ritual of claims that Muslims are somehow preventing ordinary Christians (read white English people) from observing their traditions is dangerous and untrue.

Free Speech, Britishness and The Oxford Union

The recent controversy at the Oxford Union has brought the issue of free speech back into the limelight. We are often told that Britain is becoming a multicultural society but it is important to question what that means for the old mantra,

"I do not believe what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"

The Oxford debate strikes right at the heart of what it is to be part of multicultural Britain. Should we prevent people to speak publicly about views which we know will anger certain communities? Should the Oxford Union ban itself from inviting unsavoury characters like Nick Griffin and David Irving? Is free speech an antiquated notion in light of Britain's multicultural society?

It might seem rather doctrinaire to say (emphatically) 'no' to all of these questions but that is what I believe – a lesson learnt partly from books and partly on the streets of Oxford on the night of the protests. We needn't deny the truth of our own (anti-fascist) opinions to accept that we should be challenged –John Stuart Mill points out the obvious when he says,

"Whatever people believe, on subjects on which it is of the first importance to believe rightly, they ought to be able to defend against at least the common objections"

Even when the general opinion is held to be correct, a 'truth' can lose its vivacity if it is not constantly challenged.

Freedom of speech may on occasion lead to unseemly consequences but it is a kind of insurance policy – a method by which we guarantee liberality and tolerance in a world increasingly darkened by the shadow of ethnic terrorism. Many students demonstrating outside the Oxford Union conflated two agendas. I agree with their first: we should be willing to speak out against those who make minorities feel unsafe – against those who claim that Britishness is about insularity and not about embracing and protecting those around us.

However, the second agenda – to prevent Griffin and Irving from speaking – is not something we should agree with. We must all, individually, understand why these characters' views are wrong or morally outrageous and not simply that they are so. Had I been able, I would have attended the free speech forum to better understand the arguments of my opponents. Multicultural Britain is a living truth but we endanger this status if we insist that no-one can challenge it.

Simon Main is an Oxford Student

Keeping Christmas

by Nick Spencer - Theos

Christmas is like the NHS. Most of us have some, local contact with it, and most of us like what we get. But most of us remain convinced that the institution is endangered, pushed to the point of extinction by politically-correct town-hall councillors or the health-and-safety mafia.

Every year we read about a council that has banned Christmas lights in the local swimming pool because they pose a fire hazard or about a school that has replaced its Nativity play with a dramatisation of The Tao of Piglet for fear of offending the local Zoroastrian community.

Whilst there probably are one or two fires underneath all this smoke, they are fiendishly difficult to find. Most people know about the council or school in question but they have never seen it themselves.

The interesting thing about these annual stories lies not so much in their veracity (or lack of it) as in the unanimity and vehemence of the public's reaction to them. For a nation of discreet theists, nominal Christians and occasional churchgoers, we seem to be fiercely protective of our Christmas. Why?

A recent Theos survey suggested that, whilst few Britons (churchgoers included) know the Christmas story well, its outline remains firmly in our cultural bloodstream. The majority of people (73%) know where Jesus was born and who told Mary she should expect a child, and nearly half know that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin.

Knowledge does not, of course, denote belief, let alone commitment but nor should it be dismissed. Christian stories have underwritten the nation's history, constitution, culture and symbols for over a thousand years. The British people, as the philosopher Julian Baggini recently noted in Prospect

magazine, are inherently communitarian, seeing freedom and rights as a function of belonging to a particular community. Christmas assumes a role, albeit a minor one, alongside all the other phenomena that denote what that community is: who we are, what we value and how we should live. We defend it because, even if we don't actually believe it, it is still part of who we are. Like Magna Carta, we may only have a rough idea of what it is about or when it was made, but we still think it should be on public display.

This strength of public reaction is liable to console Christians who live in iconoclastic times, when the sacred (particularly, it seems, the Christian sacred) appears to exist simply in order to be defaced. But drawing consolation from the public's angry defence of Christmas can serve, somewhat ironically, to disfigure the festival itself.

The Christmas story is not and was never meant to be a social prop, reassuring a historically contingent national community about its culture and identity. If anything, it sets out to confront such preconceptions and prejudices, with a tale that is as discomfiting as it is improbable.

The narrative, in the two gospels that offer it, forces upon us an awareness of the homeless, the refugee, the persecuted, the vulnerable, just when we would shut them out of our contented visions of peace and order. It reminds us of the need for unreserved trust and faithfulness, at a time when contract and exchange are our dominant models for relationship. It orients us beyond the here and now, towards the transcendent, the eternal, when we might otherwise seek simply to satisfy our most immediate cravings. Altogether, it does, in microcosm, what the Christian religion attempts to do in full – draw us out of ourselves and into an awareness and love of the other.

You need not be a believer for it to work. The poet Carol Ann Duffy recently collaborated with composer Sasha Johnson Manning in writing 16 new carols that were premiered at the Royal Northern College of Music in December. Duffy, a self-professed atheist, said that she was drawn to the project "because of the relevance the themes of the Christmas story still have for a modern audience, such as refugees, displacement, poverty and the joy of birth." The supernatural (not, in any case, a concept the original gospel writers would have had much truck with) is absent from The Manchester Carols but Christmas is still very much there.

The strength of the public's reaction against the prospect, however illusory, that Christmas should be renegotiated broadcasts to us the same message as 100,000 full-to-bursting Christmas church services. The British public's nominal Christianity is not quite as devoid of content as some claim. The challenge is to ensure that that content turns us not in on ourselves but out towards others.

Nick Spencer

Director of Studies

Theos – the public theology think tank

www.theosthinktank.co.uk

Does an English Christmas need Christ?

The departure of the Nativity by Andrew Rosindell MP

It may come as no surprise to those who know me that I am not a regular visitor to the country's most popular and probably busiest shopping district, Oxford Street. I don't particularly have anything against shopping; it's just that I am not overly keen on sharing the retail experience with 20 million others in what can only be described as gridlocked human traffic. Perhaps rather naively, making my annual pilgrimage to the Street, I thought myself quite clever; start now and avoid the Christmas hordes that seem to view the switching on of the lights, as an unofficial starters gun for the mayhem to begin. I was of course wrong.

This year I found myself on Oxford Street at the end of October, nearly two weeks before this year's lights and the starter gun was set to go bang! This year's lights were switched on earlier than ever, (7th November, for those who care) by a young lady named Leona Lewis, who I am assured by my researcher is a very good pop singer. Staring into a large department store's very beautiful Christmas window display, I was unsurprised to see all the usual scenes and decorations that have become synonymous with the Christmas shopping experience. Amongst the window display the usual perfectly decorated and pristinely manicured Christmas tree, fake presents, elves and Santa, tinsel, baubles and some carefully chosen, "Christmas special offers on selected items", nice I thought, for them to celebrate the birth of Christ by offering 50% off a DeLonghi Nespresso Coffee Maker, but one thing however was missing. Where was the nativity scene?

I am a Christian, but by no means would I describe my religious views as militant, but I do espouse the need to uphold the traditional values of the Christian church, their festivals of thanks and religious ceremonies. For me, Christmas should be much more than a secular holiday centred on purely commercial ends. The word itself is a contraction of Christ's Mass and is derived from the Middle English Christemasse and old English Christes Maesse and traditionally, celebrates the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary, enough of the history lesson. In effect we, as Christians, are

celebrating the beginning of our faith. In an ever growing secular and commercially driven society, when owning an "I-Phone", (I am reliably informed this is some new kind of phone / computer / music device), is more important to most, than attending Sunday Mass, I think it is important, that an extra special effort is made during Christian religious festivals, especially ones of such significance as Christmas, to remember the sacrifices Jesus made in the name of his faith and in the establishment of ours.

It is true to say that many have lost sight of the fact that England is a Christian country and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II holds the title of, "Supreme Governor of The Church of England". The Canons of the Church of England still abide by the following statement: "We acknowledge that the Queen's excellent Majesty, acting according to the laws of the realm, is the highest power under God in this kingdom, and has supreme authority over all persons in all causes, as well ecclesiastical as civil". The separation of church and state is an evocative issue that nearly all, secularists will have an opinion on and the "secularisation" of Christmas question, which is perhaps the most considered topic within this debate. Take the United States and their "Christmas period", sadly even here, the lack of traditional Christian symbolism as a form of decoration has become all too common.

I would regard our American cousins to be far more extrovert in celebrating not just Christmas, but also their faith. I would have assumed that any visitor to the U.S.A. at Christmas time would be sick of the sight of donkeys, mangers, plastic dolls (the baby Jesus) and the three wise men usually depicted as three distinguished, if not slightly over-dressed, bearded gentlemen, who more resemble something you would find in a poor local amateur theatre performance of Aladdin, than in Palestine 2000 years ago.

The Nativity scene in U.S. Christmas decorations which were once common place in many public buildings, this is no longer the case. This practice of displaying the birth of Christ, has led to so many lawsuits that this scene has all but

vanished. This is despite the landmark, precedent setting case in 1984 of, "The American Civil Liberties Union vs. The United States", in which the Union challenged the Federal Government on the grounds that displaying the Nativity was in breach of the first amendment, ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances"). The Union argued that displaying the Nativity was tantamount to the Government endorsing a religion. The American Civil Liberties Union lost the case. Despite the Federal Government's victory in the case, it would appear that the "political correctness" of the Nativity was tarnished beyond repair.

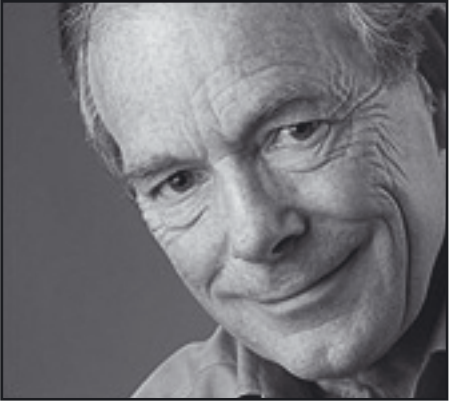
Do we, or do we not include people from 'X' ethnicity, even though the likelihood of someone from 'X' ethnicity being present in Palestine 2000 years ago is highly unlikely, but then appear unrepresentative of one or more ethnic groups. The Nativity is for many U.S. commercial enterprises, a minefield of potentially litigious or upsetting and offending arguments. Unfortunately, it would appear that the U.K. has furtively and unnoticed, followed suit.

There is of course always a balance that must be struck between knowing when to include Christ in your public celebrations and when not to. I would not dream for example, of visiting one of my local Jewish or Hindu organisations over the Christmas period and suggesting we all pray and thank Jesus for Christmas and all the happiness that this particular time of year brings to so many. In the same way I would, given the opportunity to speak at my local church's Christmas mass, remind the congregation that Christmas is not just about Oxford Street lights, Leona Lewis and getting an "I-Phone", whilst we all like these things, it is also about celebrating, unashamedly, our faith and the birth of Jesus Christ.

Andrew Rosindell is MP for Romford and Shadow Minister for Home Affairs

Interview:

Charlotte Leslie talks to **Simon Jenkins**



Simon Jenkins gives a glitteringly knowing look when he hears the word 'Crossbow'. He was one of this magazine's more illustrious editors (early 1970s) and went on to carve out a small empire in the written word. He has edited the London Evening Standard, the Insight page of The Sunday Times, worked as political editor of The Economist and received a knighthood for services to journalism in 2004, before joining the Guardian. Oh, and did I mention his back-catalogue of books?

I catch up with him briefly after a debate on national identity at Policy Exchange for a chat about Britishness with a festive slant, (it's just before Christmas recess.) "I'll do anything for Crossbow" he says, with genuine generosity. "So what three things make Christmas for you?" I ask. He is slightly thrown off balance for a second. "Good lord, I thought you were going to ask me about politics" he says. I assure him that we are building up to it. "Well," he replies after a pause.

"I suppose, a change in rhythm, leaving London - and being asked to talk about things other than politics." I am not about to push that aspect and waste my time talking to Simon Jenkins about the merits of brandy sauce over butter, so move swiftly onto the politics and back to the theme of Policy Exchange's debate. Given the

level of current immigration, how does he see Christmas in 50 years time?

"Oh, exactly the same as it is now. Things don't tend to change as people think they will. I think there will be more of a split between the religious festival aspect, and the letting off steam aspect". I am intrigued. Tell me more. "I don't just mean parties and things," he counters, rather disappointingly. "People need a change in rhythm, to do things they don't normally do in their routine. They need what used to be called holidays."

Is the way we celebrate Christmas now integral to our Britishness? I venture.

"Every country celebrates in its own way. Christmas is a time when you realise that that lots of your neighbours are not of the same culture as you, but everyone shares this, and so it becomes a very bonding event." So what do you make of politicians who rush to become the champions of Britishness, I ask.

"Ah, well I'm a great localist" he smiles. "I think a lot of it comes down to the devolution debate - what are the constituent parts of the UK? There has been ambivalence for centuries about what Britishness is, we have always been a very mongrel nation. Now the Scots and the Welsh have a definite idea, but the English still find themselves ambivalent. We have so lost touch with locality and province, we try to make up for it by finding a chauvinist Britishness. Yorkshire men and Cornishmen know don't get so wound up about their identity, I think, they are Yorkshiremen or Cornish. It is perhaps more the South East and us Londoners who don't have such a clear idea."

The great localist has pre-empted my

next question. Should forging an identity of Britishness be a bottom up, or top down process?

"Oh, bottom up, definitely, I don't believe in planting flags in the front garden. We don't need to assert ourselves in that way at the moment. If I was going to plant any flag in my garden, it would probably be a London flag! The Union Jack doesn't really mean anything to people, that is why the flag of St. George has become so popular." Mr. Jenkins evidently is not one of those Londoners who he suspects of having an identity problem. But, I say, devolution is not the only issue of national identity. At the time of meeting, Gordon Brown has not yet signed the E.U. Treaty. Does he think our Britishness is under threat if Gordo signs on the dotted line?

"There has been ambivalence for centuries about what Britishness is, we have always been a very mongrel nation. Now the Scots and the Welsh have a definite idea, but the English still find themselves ambivalent."

Simon Jenkins is emphatic. "Yes. I am a Eurosceptic and I am against it. The E.U Treaty erodes our national sovereignty; there is no doubt about that. But I do realise I live in a wider community, and some aspects of the treaty are necessary but I am generally sharply against shifting power from Britain."

In the face the signing of the E.U treaty without a referendum, which must rate as one of Gordon Brown's most undemocratic acts, how does

Simon Jenkins see democratic representation in today's Britain? Does parliament have to be quota-to-quota representative of an increasingly diverse electorate in order to represent them properly?

"It shouldn't be. Politicians and parties can worry about the fact that it's not, but local constituencies should elect whom they want to elect. I'm a real localist. It is not for the central party to decide. The essence is territorial representation and that is up to the local party." I have concerns that often the choice of candidate of the local party may be a far shot removed from the choice of those the candidate will endeavour to represent but would like to end our chat on a more festive note than the quagmire of candidate selections.

The Daily Telegraph had just published the annual story about the demise of nativity plays in schools. Simon Jenkins

is known to be an atheist. What does he think? Should schools have nativity plays? " I think they should." He says without hesitation. "We are essentially a Christian culture. We can't teach children British history without teaching them about Christianity. But I don't get hung up about saying the same for Hindu children in Bradford - it would be absurd if they were not taught about their background, but just as if I was living in India I would expect to have to learn about the country I was in, children should learn about the culture and civic history of the country they live in. It is an important part of Britishness."

So Is there a role for Faith Schools? "No." Simon Jenkins is adamant about this. " I think they lead to divided societies. In my local community in London, we have two schools. One is a Church of England school, and you have to go to church to go there. The other school may well end up as a

Muslim school. I think faith schools are a code for not wanting your child to be educated with children who are different from them." Surely, I suggest, that's a more complaint about not having the option of a non-faith school in your area rather than their existence? Apparently not. "No. I'm an atheist and I'm against the permeation of religion into education completely. I think it leads to segregation. You only have to look at Northern Ireland to see the damage they have done there."

I wonder, on leaving, whether Simon Jenkins' views on nativity plays and faith schools might in some way perhaps contain the Christmas of the atheist man: We would not have the school system we know today without the involvement of the church which set up the first schools and are the foundation of our education system today. Religion provides cultural richness and civic institutions, and is fine. As long as you don't believe in it.

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TIME FOR A BRITISH BUNDESRAT

by Daniel Hannan MEP

In Tony Blair's first conference speech as Labour leader, he promised delegates: "Under my leadership, Britain will never be isolated or left behind in Europe". Most of us took it as a commitment to closer integration with the EU. We underestimated his ambition.

Under Labour, all the things that made Britain distinctive were slowly ironed out. Proportional representation was introduced for various elections. The economy was continentalised, as taxes and regulations were raised, and our private pensions market debauched. Our common law, our jury system, habeas corpus: all were slowly aligned with European norms. Euro-style human rights codes were enacted.

Above all, in a rare example of something he seemed genuinely to care about, Tony Blair determined to scrap the House of Lords – the supreme embodiment of everything that he saw as fusty and mediaeval about the British constitution. The trouble was, he had no clear idea of what to put in its place. On two occasions, when challenged on this point in Parliament, he replied that the existing dispensation was so indefensible that anything would be better.

This argument is, of course, asinine. It is always possible to envisage something worse. And, sure enough, Labour has found it, coming up with a system of clientage that rewards the worst element in British politics.

No wonder the system has fallen into disrepute. I mean, who would want a peerage these days? The cash-for-honours affair has splattered the ermine of even the most guiltless Lords. It is hard to imagine that many middle-aged men spent Christmas huddled hopefully around their trees waiting for "a K or a big P". After the loans-for-ermine affair, Santa's was the last fur-trimmed red robe to escape unbesmirched. I don't enjoy pointing this out. Like many Bow Group members, I saw no need for Lords reform in the first place. Labour's repeated contention that "the hereditary principle has no place in modern Britain" struck me as a direct attack on the monarchy, and an indirect attack on all property. I had a basic, Burkeian objection to tampering with a system that was working perfectly adequately. "If it is not necessary to change", said the third Viscount Falkland, "it is necessary not to change". Quite.

Then again, when it is necessary to change, reform should be embraced properly. A parliamentary report published in December accurately recognised the damage caused by the recent corruption allegations. The trouble

is that its recommendations – strengthening the oversight mechanisms, giving more jurisdiction to the Electoral Commission, taking away the Prime Minister's patronage powers – would fail to address the essential problem, which is that the current method of elevation rewards the kind of person who should at all costs be kept away from legislative power, namely the busybody who can't get himself elected to anything.

Those small-c conservatives who still trot out the "if it ain't broke" line should take a closer look at the peers who have been appointed since Labour changed the rules in 2000. Some of them, of course, are qualified and patriotic. But the majority are placemen who have spent their entire lives in the public sector. They sit on committees. They draw up strategy papers. They liaise with stakeholders. They drive innovation. They spend a surprising amount of time on the Eurostar to Brussels. And their first instinct, faced with almost any problem, is to spend money – your money, of course, since few of them have ever made or sold anything.

The upper chamber, as currently constituted, is the supreme embodiment of the quango state. Over decades, British democracy has become decaffeinated as decisions that were once the province of elected representatives have been passed over to the NICE, the Learning and Skills Council, the Highways Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and a thousand other bureaucracies stretching up to the European Commission. The proper role of Parliament is to remind these agencies that they work for the rest of us. Yet both chambers are increasingly filled with ex-quangocrats; and, while MPs must at least answer to their constituents, peers find that they have simply moved to the largest, most comfortable and most intrusive quango of the lot.

No wonder some are tempted to buy their way in. A peer has power without accountability. He can legislate, he can meddle, but he is invulnerable to public opinion. And, by the simple expedient of claiming his allowances, he can reclaim the £500,000-odd that he donated in a decade. I repeat, several peers, both hereditary and appointed, are selfless and saintly. But a fallen system is not redeemed by virtuous individuals.

Removing the vestigial democratic elements from the appointments procedure – which is what cutting out the PM's role means – will exacerbate the problem. Quangoes will appoint quangoes just as, in Isaac Asimov's dystopias, robots programmed robots

without human involvement. The voter, already largely shut out of government, will be wholly excluded.

We ought, of course, to be going in precisely the opposite direction, making peers accountable to everyone else. Several options suggest themselves. We might plump for uncomplicated, straightforward elections. We might prefer some fancy LibDem-style multi-member affair. We might even try selecting people for brief periods by lot.

My own preference is for the model put forward by Direct Democracy, the alliance of young Tory MPs, MEPs and MSPs pushing for more the democratisation and decentralisation of power in Britain. (See www.direct-democracy.co.uk.) We localists have come up with what we reckon is an elegant way to have an accountable second upper house without creating a new tier of salaried politicians. Essentially, we want a Bundesrat chamber, a senate to represent the provinces. Each county and city would second its chief councillors, in proportion to local party strengths, who would sit for three or four days a month. Senators would have the power to delay, amend and in some circumstances block legislation, but not to propose new laws. There would, in other words, be fewer laws. The method of composition ought to go some way towards correcting the metropolitan bias of the lower House; and, because senators' primary role would be as local councillors, they would be less likely to go native. I'm less fussed about the precise method of election, though, than about the general principle, that laws should be made by those who have to answer to the rest of us, rather than those who excel at sucking up to people in power.

Once we had an accountable upper chamber, the bestowal of life peerages – or hereditary peerages, for that matter – could devolve to the Queen, in practice as well as in theory. By all means let's have baronies and viscountcies: they are a cheap and harmless way of giving pleasure to their recipients. But we should separate the decorative parts of the constitution from the functional.

The chief purpose of a legislature is to represent the interests of the people the state machine. Never forget that.

Daniel Hannan is a Conservative MEP for South East England and Telegraph columnist. Read Daniel every day at www.blogs.telegraph.co.uk/politics/danielhannan

BRITISHNESS

by David Willetts MP



H G Wells observed that the great advantage of being British was that we did not have a national dress. And when Gordon Brown wants us to fly the Union Flag in our gardens we feel that it is, well, not quite British. Postage stamps capture how it ought to be. Other countries have to state their name on their stamps whereas we just have the Queen's head and leave it at that.

But all that is changing as we get involved in and ever more anguished debate about what it is to be British and how that differs from being English. The traditional way of getting round this reluctance to be so explicit about who we are was to give long associational lists. This had the subliminal message that we were a kind of club. One of my favourite lists is this one: "The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to and fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the labour exchanges, the rattle of pin tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning - all these are not only fragments, but characteristic fragments of the English scene."

It is very odd how most people think that the image of maids cycling to Holy Communion came from John Major when he was quoting George Orwell. And John Major was not being nostalgic and retro. It was actually one of his most radical speeches - a point which we will come back to at the end of this article.

Different countries have different sources of national identity. And there

is a crucial difference between Englishness and Britishness. Britishness is about the face we give to the outside world - it is the monarchy, Parliament, the British Army and historically the British Empire. There is no blood and soil nationalism in our love of country. We love Great Britain because of its institutions, even its political institutions. But not every country defines its national identity in this way. The postcard test reveals the difference. When foreign tourists come here and buy images which capture the otherness of the place they have visited, they buy pictures of Buckingham Palace, Parliament or even 10 Downing Street. But you would be very odd if you visited Paris and wanted to send back cards of the Elysee Palace or the National Assembly. They are just not so fundamental to the sense of what it is to be French.

One of the reasons why we are sceptical of the European project is surely that it is being constructed using building blocks that touch more fundamentally our sense of who we are. If it were central to the European project that we should harmonise our cooking or our engineering we might find that there was more opposition in France or Germany. It is not that one source of national identity is right and the other is wrong. It is just that national identities are so different that they are even defined in different ways.

This leads us back to John Major and George Orwell. Orwell had a very ambivalent attitude to our political institutions and our social structure. But he was also deeply patriotic. So the quote is from his essay *England Your England*, written in the darkest days of the Second World War which shows a love of England for its culture and the everyday life of its citizens. He was arguing that was worth fighting for whatever one's view of our institutions. And because he was describing England it was a credible argument - it would have seemed very odd if he had written in the same way about Great Britain.

When John Major used the same argument 50 years later he was confronting the Conservative Party's extreme Eurosceptics and arguing that even if we signed the Maastricht Treaty the fundamentals of our national identity would not be affected. It was another argument for a cultural account of national identity. And, as is the tradition in our party, any Tory deploying a radical argument tends to find it easier if they cloak their words in historical, as opposed to current, imagery. On this occasion, it ended up hiding the real argument so thoroughly that the real meaning of an interesting and thoughtful speech was completely lost. The truth is that Englishness is a cultural identity and Britishness is a political identity. That messiness has served us well for the past 300 years. But it is now under intense pressure.

There is one future for our Party in which we become the English Nationalist Party in a federal Europe. It is not a future we relish. The alternative is a robust defence of Britishness and the political institutions on which it rests. That is what we are committed to.

'All Hot Air'

– Labour's Failed Strategy on Fuel Poverty

by Tony Lodge

As the first frost of winter bites, more and more families will spend this Christmas struggling to pay fuel bills and consequently join the growing number of British households in fuel poverty. Against a background of rapidly rising energy prices, Gordon Brown should be praying Jack Frost doesn't do his worst. The consequences of a cold winter for those on low incomes could highlight the worst social crisis to face Britain for decades.

More and more British households are spending a higher percentage of their income on energy costs. The number of households categorized as being in fuel poverty is expected to have doubled in the last four years, up from two to four million households. During this period we have had to endure the human tragedy, and political scandal, of Britain having 25,000 excess winter pensioner deaths each year as over 22% of older people have gone without gas or electricity in order to make ends meet.

Fuel poverty is when 10% or more of household income is spent on fuel for the home. It is reckoned that half of people in fuel poverty are pensioners, which should make these alarming statistics more pressing for the Government.

The Government is officially committed to completely eradicating fuel poverty by 2018 but this is now regarded as unachievable as energy prices spiral upwards and the Government's own mechanisms for combating fuel poverty such as the Winter Fuel Payment have not been increased in line with prices. Labour's own budget to tackle this blight looks set to remain static, against the advice of its own Fuel Poverty Advisory Group.

The Citizens Advice Bureau has revealed that the number of people seeking help with overwhelming debt problems soared to a record high in 2006 and the number seeking help because they are seriously

behind on gas and electricity payments rose by a third. Coupled with rising council tax, food bills and petrol and diesel costs the pressures on lower income families is reaching breaking point.

Since 2004 energy prices have spiked. Gas prices from the beginning of 2004 to the end of 2006 rose by 67%. This was coupled with a 41% increase in electricity prices in the same period. The average fuel bill has risen from £572 in 2003 to £924 today. After a small reduction earlier this year, gas prices are rising again and this will affect electricity prices as gas now generates 40% and rising of Britain's electricity. The Government has released data which supports fears that consistent high energy prices will result in more and more households falling into fuel poverty.

There are a number of reasons for higher prices. According to OFGEM, the two main reasons for the price of gas are high oil prices, which strongly influence the gas price, and declining UK gas supplies. Importantly, as gas is now the main fuel used to generate electricity in the UK there is a direct knock-on effect on electricity prices. The 'Dash for Gas' policy pursued in the early 1990s has resulted in the UK becoming perilously overdependent on supplies of gas, the bulk of which is to be imported from Russia, Algeria and the Middle East.

The Paris based International Energy Agency has warned that Britain is becoming too dependent on gas to generate its electricity on grounds of cost and security of supply. This warning should be heeded and acted on without delay if we are to address rising bills, more fuel poverty and energy security.

Fuel poverty and energy policy are intrinsically linked. A balanced energy policy which utilises different sources helps stabilise prices, especially if a large proportion of this generation can be indigenously sourced. After all, the fundamental purpose of any energy policy

should be to ensure reliable and affordable energy for domestic and industrial customers. High bills not only place more families in fuel poverty, they also erode our economic competitiveness as industry costs rise as a consequence of higher overheads. There are many reports of energy intensive industries hurting on the back of spiralling energy costs.

Another problem for Britain of more gas dependence is the lack of a free market in energy on the continent which results in gas supplies not responding to strong UK prices and demand. Indeed, there is no shortage of gas in Europe, largely supplied by Russia, but there is no connection between supply, demand and price. British attempts to resolve this in the EU have singularly failed. Pressure from German and French power companies to protect their monopolies appear to have prevented the EU taking action in Britain's favour.

Overdependence on this one fuel for electricity generation is hurting the poorest families in Britain and driving more and more into fuel poverty. Next month's Energy Bill must embrace a more balanced energy mix which can help get prices down in the long term and better guarantee energy security. Nuclear, clean coal and renewables must be embraced in order to when Britain away from dangerous overdependence on foreign gas. If not, then the Government's dismal recent record on fuel poverty will be cruelly exposed in the harsh winters ahead as the catastrophic social and economic implications for Britain become clear.

'All Hot Air' – Labour's Failed Strategy on Fuel Poverty by Tony Lodge is published by the Bow Group on Monday December 17th 2007

Time for a Run on the Bank (Holiday)?

by Mark Nicholson

Over the Christmas period, along with over-indulging in turkey, mince pies and over-sentimental television programmes, the British public will also be gorging themselves on Bank Holidays. English and Welsh residents will consume three eighths of their annual intake and inhabitants of Scotland one half.

Until October 2007, Bank Holidays were specific to banks and there was no wider entitlement to leave from work on those days. The statutory minimum holiday was 20 days, including bank holidays. This was extended however to 24 days in October 2007 and will be 28 days (including bank holidays) by June 2009. There is still no requirement to give staff bank holidays off but the new regulations will effectively give all employees the equivalent of bank holidays in addition to the existing 20 days minimum.

As so often, the government does not have precise figures on how many people will be affected by this change, although it estimates 'up to 6 million'. Assuming salaries remain the same, the extension of paid holiday from 20 days to 28 will mean a 3.4% increase in salary per day worked. This would be equivalent to a total cost of £4,338 million if the affected workers were on the national average salary. If, as is more likely, they fall into the bottom decile of earners, the cost to businesses would be £2,120m. Both of these figures are net of employers' National Insurance Contributions.

These costings are not to begrudge, Scrooge-like, employers receiving additional holiday. Indeed, holiday allowances and giving flexible working time are an increasingly important part of compensation packages as employers compete to attract staff. However for the government to mandate additional leave from above, outside the scope of negotiations between employer and employee, places an unnecessary burden on both the employer, who has to pay for the additional non-working time, and the employee, who may wish to maximise his or her earnings by working more days.

It could fairly be argued that the UK has the joint equal fewest bank holidays in the EU (although many continental bank holidays are lost when they fall on the weekend) and one of the lowest mandatory holiday allowances and that that latest dogma, 'quality of life' is enhanced by taking more holidays rather than by Britain becoming the 'sweatshop of Europe'.

Conversely, the UK's competition, both for blue- and white-collar services, is not limited to the 'leisure-land' of the EU and we can ill-afford to be complacent or decadent while the world outside beavers away. Moreover, on choice and quality of life grounds, the European model may not represent the European workers' free choice on the pay/leisure scale as his days of work and hours worked are limited by laws which potentially prevent them from working longer and receiving greater reward.

The value which the public places on bank holidays may be indicated by the recent experience of the St. Andrew's day holiday in Scotland. Conversely, this may point a way ahead for specified holidays. From 2007 onwards, employees in Scotland have the right to request 30th November as holiday. This is not an automatic bank holiday, however employees have the right to take it as holiday out of their general allowance. Few however did so in 2007, due largely to the intemperate weather in late November. This suggests that people would rather take their holidays when they chose rather than have them determined by the government.

Employees' holiday rights have greatly improved since 1871 when bank holidays were first introduced. Before this only Good Friday and Christmas Day and occasional local festivals were generally allowed as holidays. Public Holidays were brought in on specific days (and were introduced through the back door as being compulsory for banks only) to ease the bill's passage through parliament. The specification of holiday days was therefore a small price to pay for a

genuine extension of leisure time to workers. Now that employees are to be guaranteed 28 days leave a year apart from weekends, requiring them to take 8 of these days at specified times seems overly prescriptive.

Whether the minimum holiday allowance is 20 or 28 days, The Scottish St. Andrew's day ruling could provide a model for more flexible holiday allowances in the future. Employees could have the right to take current bank holidays as leave if they so wished but would not be required to take it. This would not only give greater freedom to individuals when planning their holidays but could also avoid the strain placed on the transport system on most bank holidays. Making bank holidays more flexible in this way would give most employees more leisure at their discretion at much lower cost to employers than simply adding specific days onto existing holiday allowances.



CAN MULTICULTURALISM WORK IN BRITAIN ?

by Jeremy Thomass

'..it is quite true that we and the Americans have much in common, but the essential thing for mutual understanding is to realise what we have not got in common'. Stanley Baldwin, 1925.

Multiculturalism is an essentially American notion inherently unsuited to British history and traditions. America, both as a settler society built up from its very beginnings by immigration, and as a nation consciously founded to uphold an abstract idea of Liberty, is profoundly different from the post-Roman kingdoms of Britain, which achieved a gradual unity over centuries and developed a deep-rooted tradition of political pragmatism as a result. That American political ideas, from republicanism to the election of judges, should fail to flourish in Britain is consequently unsurprising. That the Labour Party of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown should adopt such an unmistakably American notion as multiculturalism is further proof, were proof needed, of the indelibly American origins of the whole New Labour 'project'. The central idea of multiculturalism, that no particular way of life in any country should be given greater privileges than any other, first emerged within the American student protest movements of the 1960's and '70's that helped form the political ideas of those such as Bill and Hillary Clinton. Protesting first against the Vietnam War and perceived racial and sexual discrimination, many youthful radicals went on to question the fundamental tenet of 'Americanism' that had underpinned American society since the era of mass immigration before the First World War. This held it was a duty of citizenship to conform to the established culture of individual effort and responsibility generally accepted by the long-settled majority of the population.

The new dissenters opposed this contention, believing the possession of human rights by individuals to be as much dependent upon membership of imprecisely defined 'communities', as something stemming from their own basic humanity. It followed that the rights of the individual did not necessarily override those of any such 'community', and that the State itself was nothing more than a 'community of communities'.

This, in turn led to the assertion that any idea of dignity being dependent upon the possession of rights was peculiarly Western and had no claim to universal status; in other words, 'multiculturalism'. Here was the basis for the later encouragement, not to mention subsidy, of countless 'community organisations', headed by often unelected 'community leaders', by American liberal politicians at both State and Federal levels. This reached its peak during the Carter and Clinton Administrations, themselves often dependent upon such bodies to bolster their political support.

For all that, the enduring Constitutional principle that the United States had been established by its people as a single nation, 'States' Rights notwithstanding, remained intact. So did the people's direct entitlement to 'Justice', 'domestic Tranquility', 'defence', 'general Welfare' and 'the blessings of Liberty' from the nation. Here was the foundation on which the Reagan and Bush Administrations would seek to rebuild American national identity and self-confidence during the 'Second Cold War' of the 1980's and the 'War on Terror' after 2001.

In the interval in between, however, ambitious British Labour politicians would learn how 'communitarianism' and 'multiculturalism' had benefited their American political allies. Following their own victory in 1997, they began applying these lessons at home with consequences that were to prove deep and long lasting.

Britain's very nature as a state makes it incompatible with multiculturalist ideas. Like the former Habsburg Monarchy, it was first built up, not as a nation, but as a personal union of the distinct different territories and nationalities of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland under a common Crown between the Middle Ages and the 17th century. Each of these constituent nationalities continued to retain its own separate legal system or religious settlement, or both, even after the more extensive Acts of Union of 1707 and 1800. They thus maintained their own particular identities within the resulting multi-national state, whether it was administered through centralism or federalism. This in turn ensured that

many of those who came to live in Britain from abroad, whether French Protestants in the 17th or Central European Jews in the 20th century, were largely absorbed into these established nationalities, and assumed much of their identity as their own. All this seemingly mattered little to Britain's New Labour rulers after 1997. Shunning such traditional, uniting terms as 'Britain' and 'British' and relegating the Monarchy to a lesser public role, they spoke instead of the 'U.K', almost always referred to by its initials alone. This was held to define more a 'community of communities' than a state of any meaningful kind. Like their American forerunners, they then proceeded to encourage and subsidise a whole multitude of 'community organisations' and 'leaders', however constituted or elected, in the expectation they would both promote their own communitarian and multiculturalist 'values' and support them politically. It was precisely these values with which they wished the country to identify, rather than with the historic institutions that had maintained its unity as a multi-national state for centuries. While this undoubtedly weakened Britain's sense of national unity and identity, it substituted very little in return save the creation, at much expense, of a new class of unofficial local officeholders representing little except their own immediate circle of allies and clients. Here was the plain failure of a policy.

Such are the circumstances amid which the Brown Government has belatedly begun attempting to rebuild some overarching sense of 'Britishness'. By seeking to do so on the basis of abstract 'values', however, rather than the inherited institutions of the Crown, Parliament and the Law it continues to distrust, it risks repeating its predecessor's failure with multiculturalism. British history plainly shows that it is the reality of institutions which endures, while abstract principles wax and wane. It is the peaceful and consistent evolution of those institutions which can best ensure the continued stability and progress of our country. Here is the foundation on which the next Conservative Government can best begin to build up a renewed sense of common purpose for Britain.

Essay Competition - Winner

Crossbow set an essay competition to members, to write on the theme 'Is Christmas Dead'? Many thanks to all those who entered, the editorial team greatly enjoyed reading the submissions. As predicted, picking just one winner was extremely hard, but congratulations to Mark Nicholson for his winning entry.

Far from Exmas by Mark Nicholson

For a dead festival, Christmas shows remarkable vitality in extending its occasionally tacky influence over an ever greater proportion of the calendar. Christmas decorations seemingly go up in the shops earlier and Christmas sales persist longer with each passing year. Retailers count on the run up to Christmas to provide up to half of their annual profits, TV companies roll out their top offerings in the expectation of attracting the year's highest ratings, Footballers complain at being forced to perform as many as three times in one week and attention is paid for once to the singles chart and to what the monarch has to say.

To accomplish all of this is a remarkable performance for a festival with hardening arteries. Yet is this the work of the 'Christ-mass' or of an older, pagan tradition? Many of the familiar aspects of Christmas festivities are not explicitly Christian and have more in common with the pre-Christian festival of Yule when food and drink would be over-indulged in to celebrate the passing of the winter equinox (on 21st December) with the promise that the days would now get longer and that warmth and eventually fertility would return to the local soil on which all of the community directly depended for their continued survival.

It was the genius of the early Christian missionaries to adapt this pagan festival to be a celebration of Christ's birth which enabled both the easier acceptance of their message and Christmas' survival as a major part of our calendar. From its inception therefore, Christmas has included aspects of many cultures. If the nature of its celebration has changed over the last 50 years or so it is that the Christian veneer on the pagan core has worn thinner. Birmingham council's 1990s much-criticised decision to re-brand Christmas as 'Winterval' was not without reason - not the reasoning that motivated them, to avoid offending followers of other religions - but that it would now almost make sense for Christians to separate their religious celebrations from the secular mid-winter blow-out that Christmas has become.

It is the essential pagan nature of the Christmas celebration that has enabled it to survive and indeed to grow in significance over

the last 150 years, mirroring the decline in Christian observance and belief (in that order) over almost exactly the same period. Many of the traditions which we now associate with Christmas were invented during the Victorian period (alongside that other modern opium of the secular masses, organised team sports). It would surprise the modern observer to note the low profile of Christmas in the early 19th century and before. A half day was often worked and the early Carlton Club once held a committee meeting on Christmas Day. Going further back, Christmas was banned in the name of godliness and the avoidance of popish festivals under the Protectorate, a movement from which many on both the left and right trace ideological roots. The ban on eating mince pies on Christmas Day enacted at this time famously remains in force. Only in the Victorian period was the Christmas tree imported from Germany and did the exchange of gifts become common. The significance of the festival grew as the century went on, driven by Victorian sentimentalism, saccharine regard for children and the family and growing commercialism, which powered the festival to undreamt of heights over the 20th century.

The secularisation and commercialisation of Christmas may have obscured the Christian festival of Christmas but they have at least kept it alive in the public consciousness. If any Christian festival is in danger of obscurity it is the theologically far more significant (despite its pagan name) Easter. The resurrection is at the core of Christian belief whereas the biblical passages which deal with Jesus' birth are regarded by textual critics as the most conjectural parts of the two out of four gospels in which they occur. Yet despite this and having been granted an equal allocation of bank holidays to Christmas, recent surveys of state school children suggested a lack of knowledge of the reason for the Easter festival. Easter is now almost exclusively celebrated by practicing Christians while the rest of the country moans about the over-concentration of bank holidays in one (albeit moving, which also does not aid Easter's recollection) part of the year.

We therefore have a modern Christmas festival which is increasingly secular yet which is nonetheless widely celebrated. It is this that gives Christmas continuing importance in

modern Britain. A recent survey of Christmas' environmental impact estimated that one third of families consumed a traditional Christmas dinner. This is almost certainly an underestimate, however even if it were true it would represent a greater act of collective observance even than royal weddings, funerals or penalty shoot-out defeats. On a smaller scale, Christmas also brings families together in an increasingly fractured society, sometime only time that relatives meet from one year to the next. Beyond nominally-Christian society, even the arch-atheist Richard Dawkins has described himself as a 'cultural Christian' who is happy to celebrate Christmas and many followers of other religions or none erect trees and exchange presents at Christmas.

Christmas is thus a festival which is capable of uniting people of many backgrounds and cultures. However it does this by having a specific date, rituals and focus rather than by embracing the false doctrine of Multi-Culturalism. A nation can exist while including many cultures. Britain has always contained many cultures, even before the waves of post-war immigration. However for people to form a nation, there needs to be a sense of overarching unity which unites people of different backgrounds, be they English, Scots, Welsh or Northern Irish or whatever their religion or ethnicity. The ties which bind these groups can often seem loose enough without (capitalised) Multi-Culturalism proclaiming that all identities are of equal value and should be celebrated in distinct silos. Rather Christmas, stripped of much of its Christian focus as it is, and with its roots in a multiplicity of cultures does provide a common national focus, a time when the nation takes a collective pause and reflects. Even the most hardened opponent of Christmas cannot help be affected by the closure of businesses, schools and the transport system over Christmas and the press in the shops before. Whether this is the work of Christmas, Yule or Winterval, it is worth preserving. Not that the midwinter festival needs the approval of the state or the governing classes to continue. It has survived changes of religions, being banned and some appalling novelty songs. It has become locked in the primal national psyche and as such is immortal.

Essay Competition - Runners up

'In modern, secular, multicultural Britain, is Christmas dead?'

by David Meacock

Alongside the main last question "is Christmas dead" are four others to answer.

First, in spite of various forms and degrees of devolved government to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, let us assume that Britain does in fact still exist.

Second, every population will consider itself to be "modern", citing various recent innovations to show that progress has been made from previous times, and so this qualification seems somewhat meaningless.

Third, Britain is unambiguously not "multicultural"! The only established religion forming a central part of Britain's unwritten constitution, is Christianity via the Church of England. Many cultures and religions co-exist in Britain, but Census figures show three quarters of the population consider themselves Christian. The Ten Commandments form the basis of our laws. Looking at the country's history and heritage, it is unquestionably predominately Christian based; we are to a large extent what we have been.

Unlike in the USA where it is illegal to say the Lord's Prayer in a school, UK legislation requires that with a few exceptions, such as in faith schools, Religious Education is taught in accordance with the requirement that Christianity predominates at each and every Key Stage - Christian content must exceed 50%. Clearly all cultures are not currently equal in their influence, with no one protagonist, in today's Britain; the generally perceived meaning of a so-called multicultural society.

Fourth, the country is underpinned by Christian tradition, and so at least at a subconscious level, Britain is arguably not secular. However, as only an estimated 5% are regular church-goers, at a conscious level we live in a secular society; indeed often primarily driven by material consideration. With house prices being at an all-time high in

relation to earnings, mothers are forced to work - often against their natural instinct - but as many teachers will confirm, this loss of parental contact can be detrimental to children's development.

The last, most substantial part of the question might have been better expressed as: "is Christmas in early 21st Century Britain dead?"

Christmas is unquestionably an important annual focus point in Britain. Superstore shelves are stacked high with special goodies at Christmas, to facilitate the exchange of presents and Christmas Parties. While certain countries which might seem more Christian, because there is a higher proportion of regular church-going among their populations than in Britain - such as USA, and in European countries where the Roman Catholic church is strong - celebrate Christmas in a significant way, their end of year partying tends to put more emphasis on Thanksgiving or seeing in the New Year, than on Christmas. It would therefore appear that we, in Britain, have retained the end of year specifically Christmas partying tradition, to a greater degree, which the early Christians took over and turned into a celebration of Christ's birth. Over the last 25 years while New Year's Eve celebrations seem to have become increasingly significant, maybe in competition with other counties, the celebration of Christmas has nonetheless remained: we in Britain will use any opportunity for a knees-up, no matter how frequently they come!

In a recent list of 32 things likely to cause stress, Christmas comes a surprisingly high fourth after divorce, moving house and career changes. Families generally spend more time together; or time apart on account of bereavement or other fallout is more poignant at Christmas time. In December, everyone seems to be rushing round to prepare for the party and present giving aspects of the festival. Special school plays and many other musical and theatrical events add to frenzied Christmas activity.

So, Christmas at a certain level is certainly not dead in today's Britain. However, for a Christian, the core of Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ. Thus, the most important aspect of the question as it has been posed is really how relevant is the Christian core meaning of Christmas in today's Britain. As the adage, which says, "Put the World to right; start with yourself" implies, surely of even more importance than its relevance to everyone else, or the country as a whole, is whether it is relevant to you, personally. Before answering, you need to understand that in short the Christian Message is that God created a perfect world, which became corrupted. Because man's legalistic sacrifices could not ultimately restore man and the world to perfection, God so loved the World that he sent Jesus to be born into the world so that he could make the ultimate sacrifice and die on our behalf to give believers a route to ultimately be with God in heaven, eternally. So, rather than asking whether Christmas is dead in today's Britain, ask yourself is the core meaning of Christmas dead or alive for you; or is it just another excuse for another Party!

Essay Competition - Runners up

Christmas RIP?

by Luke Fromant

In modern, secular, multicultural Britain, is Christmas dead? The simple answer is no, but it is quite definitely on the critical list. While Britain is multicultural with many different religions all of which has their own religious festivals, such as Diwali, Honaker & similar festivals. Each religion celebrates their festivals, with gusto. That is except Christians & their main festival of Christmas.

There are several reasons why Christmas is not celebrated as it should be as a religious festival. Among them is because we in Britain have a tendency not to wish to offend other religions. This is despite the fact other religions have always acknowledge that Christmas should be celebrated by all Christians. After; all this is supposed to be a Christian country. In some cases, members of other religions such as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims & Jews send Christmas cards to their friends including their Christian friends. As they acknowledge that while their religion does not celebrate Christmas the other religions do celebrate it.

In recent years people throughout the country no longer send religious cards which now have the non Christian words such as "Seasons Greetings" or similar. Instead of "Merry Christmas & a Happy New Year". Also in some cases Primary Schools no longer have nativity plays. Yet attendances at Christmas services & midnight mass on Christmas Eve are both very popular.

Another contributory factor as to why Christmas is almost dead is due to the over commercialisation of Christmas. These days it seems as soon as the autumn term starts. The shops start to put out their Christmas Departments out on display so that we can start to buy them. Also as soon as Halloween has happened out comes further goodies such as chocolate Advent calendars, crackers, large tins of chocolates & the usual mince pies.

As a result of this over commercialisation we are made to think that we must go & shop until we drop for the festive season. The main result of this over commercialisation of

Christmas is the high level of debt in many cases people are still paying off debts accumulated from last Christmas. This is due in part to pester power from Children to their parents who as a result go off & buy these expensive presents which is some cases they cant afford, as they do want to their children to be disappointed with their presents.

In these days of multicultural Britain both Children & Adults don't really know why we celebrate Christmas. They just seem to associate it with presents & lots of food & drink.

In these secular times It is up to the Christian churches to take advantage of the full churches on Christmas Eve. To shout the Christmas message from their pulpits & to take the Christmas back from the retailers & teach us in this modern secular, multicultural Britain that Christmas is not dead but very much alive. Until the churches do this Britain will remain secular even if Britain benefits from being multicultural as it always has been.

A TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS – NOW WOULDN'T THAT BE GREAT!

Bob Peedle, Editor of England's Standard and Vice Chairman of The Royal Society of St George, looks back at Christmas past and wonders where it has gone – and hopes it may come back!

During the Second World War, as a very young lad, Christmas was magical. It was the time when my parents, father was a Police Officer for London Transport and mother looked after myself and my baby brother; tried to do something special for us. With any luck a relative in the country would provide a chicken to roast and our stockings would have some treasured surprises, mostly home made – not only could we not afford anything special but food was scarce.

When the war finished this got a little better. The stocking held perhaps a small orange, a bar of chocolate and some nuts. I had my first banana in 1946 – wow! Presents in the late 1940s tended to be home made as well. I remember my grandfather, a gunner in the First World War and a Flight Sergeant clerk in the RAF for the second, made me a fort made out of scraps of wood. It was magic!

As a member of the Sunday School and later on of the St Paul's, Ruislip Manor, Church Choir again Christmas took on a special meaning, special services and a little bit more pocket money.

Since then we have grown richer, perhaps even greedier, and the cost of Christmas has increased, the quality of presents increased, many of which do not last nearly as long as my home made toy fort of those meagre years after the war.

When my own children were growing up, I was, like my father, a policeman, but in the Metropolitan Police and in the sixties we were quite well paid in comparison with other professions, but still we were not rich. Now we bought toys and presents for our children and each other, and for the rest of our family. Still we had stocking for the children, and special food treats were part of their contents.

Nearly twenty-five years ago I remarried, my wife having like me been divorced meant that we gathered together a larger family. Today we have fifteen grandchildren and three great grandchildren between us. Christmas could be expensive. It is easier to give money than presents because with greater family mobility, apart from one set of children they all live far away from our home.

How do we try to have a traditional Christmas? Well that is not easy. Our church in Alfriston, St Andrews, has a wonderful Rector who introduced such as monthly family services, where it does not matter if the kids are noisy or the babies cry. He also reintroduced the fairly recent tradition of a 'Chris tingle' every Christmas Eve. In the magical atmosphere of the church, full of children and parents and grand parents, we gather. The service is truly great. It is relaxed, it is tuneful, and the children all play their part in the lighting of the candles and the distribution of the Chris tingle oranges with their symbols representing the world.

After that we adjourn to my wife's youngest daughter's house in the Village for a sumptuous meal with their three children. This is always a lovely evening. Good food, excellent company and excited children – although today the youngest, Emma, is eleven, the next, Lucy, is studying to become a teacher and the oldest, Martin is in his second year as a Sapper in the Royal Engineers. They are all excited at the expectancy of presents the following day.

Christmas Day we often spend with friends, or last year actually went off to a hotel on the Isle of Wight, but missed seeing the family. A restful day, a full lunch, the Queen at 3 o'clock, and perhaps some games to see the day out.

Like His Holiness The Pope, I decry the fact that Christmas has become so commercial. Where are the home made presents under the tree, those made with care and love by a devoted parent or grandparent for delightful children? Where are the treks, sometimes through the snow, to the local church to give thanks for the birth of Jesus Christ? Where are the families happily eating and celebrating together? Where is the lack of jealousy because Johnny got a bigger present than Freddy? Where are the carol singers raising money for their favourite charity.

As a late teenager I sang with the local Presbyterian Church of England choir. We toured the streets of Eastcote in Middlesex to raise charitable money. We had nothing by happy memories of each road, street and lane. Does the overzealous 'health and safety' regime mean that this no longer occurs. Although I applaud their aims, I detest our local Rotary Club or Round Table coming round the streets with a trailer behind a car, with a man dressed as Father Christmas, playing piped carols and Christmas songs and a multitude of helpers banging on doors demanding gifts of money. When we did it, for real, the

householders usually came out with a gift of cash, sometimes a glass of sherry or a mince pie, and many of them joined in the singing. Mind you very few houses has TVs in those days!

So what has put our traditional Christmas behind us? Is it the ease of communications and entertainment provided by the television companies? Is it the considerable wealth that even the apparently poorest people can rake (or fake) up? Is it the greed of those wishing for only the best and most expensive presents.

One Christmas, my wife and I house sat for a cousin in Scotland. It was near the small town of Money Musk in Aberdeenshire. We went to the local Church of Scotland where, even as strangers, we were welcomed so wonderfully. At one of the services, the children gave everyone a small home made present, including us, the strangers from south of the border – and you cannot get much further south than the South Coast of Sussex! We had a simple Christmas that year, but one full of interest and friendship.

So what do we think of as a traditional Christmas? Well, I would suggest that it has a different meaning to each of us, but to me commercialism has been the ruination of it. Our many grandchildren do not get much in value from us, because as pensioners, we cannot be too generous, but at least what we give is given with love. To others a traditional Christmas is one of excess, excess of food, drink and expensive gifts, each trying to outdo the other. To many of the older generation Christmas is that of the old days, of the Dickens days when a gift of a pen, or gloves, or handkerchiefs was something to treasure and be thankful for. To the poor folk of those periods, it was perhaps when the charitable moneyed classes would lay on some ale and food. When snow lay all around, and all entertainment was home made, just like many of the presents.

Today, Christmas has its darker side. During my time as a policeman I saw much of that. Housebreakings increased with clever housebreakers targeting those houses with stacks of presents under the clearly visible Christmas Tree. When everyone worked up to Christmas Eve, and many office or works parties were held around lunchtime on that day. Everyone also returned to work after Boxing Day and may have had the New Year off if they were lucky. I will never forget one Christmas eve in the early 1970s. I was the Inspector in charge of Traffic Control at New Scotland Yard. I was on duty for the Christmas Eve and at lunchtime all was quite quiet. I had reduced staff to a minimum and to give the radio operator a break I took over one of our channels. At about 1 o'clock it all went mad. I was getting a call to a Road Traffic Accident for London at greater than one a minute. Each one of them included allegations of drunken driving, dangerous driving, drivers failing to stop, in fact all the signs of drivers ignoring the danger of alcohol at their parties. This went on for some three hours. We never stopped, all my staff returned, of their own free will, to help spread the load in the control room, and every one of our patrols on the streets of London had more than one incident to deal with. In the name of 'Christmas' people were being killed, maimed or just seriously traumatised – just before the day that was meant to celebrate peace on earth and good will to all men.

Now Christmas seems to run from about four days before Christmas into the new year.

Let us have a happy Christmas, let us remember what we are celebrating, and let us be charitable to our fellow man, especially those suffering. When I retired from the Police, I was lucky enough to be enticed into becoming a soldier – only a part time one, but nevertheless, an officer with Her Majesty's Commission with the Royal Military Police. For the next fifteen years I worked as such either part time or for periods of full time. I saw the dedication of the men and women in the uniforms of our armed services, and for those on operations, in hostile parts of the world, Christmas was special. It was a little reminder of home, also a time when the officers turned the tables on the men and women in the ranks and served them Christmas Dinner.

Today, with The Royal Society of St George, I edit the Society's Journal, England's Standard. I receive many letters about England and Englishness, and also about many matters than impinge on the political world. I have to be apolitical, not showing favour to any one political party, nor to any doctrine of any one party. It is not easy as I am a man who has his own ideas and wishes but those I must suppress to obey our Royal Charter. We publish items that hopefully show both sides of an argument, or the views of different political dogma, but now and then we receive something that ought to reach the heart strings of every decent, thinking person. At the Sussex Branch lunch earlier this month, one member was selling a poem, nicely reproduced, for a minimum of a £1.50 donation to the Royal British Legion. Christmas means so many different things to so many different people – read the poem and see what it now means to you!

The following poem is appearing in our March 2008 edition of England's Standard, and it will be inviting donations from readers (perhaps a minimum of £1.50 each) to go to the Royal British Legion, an organisation that supports serving and former service personnel from all three Armed Services. If you wish to contribute, please send cash, or a Postal order or Cheques payable to The Royal British Legion, to me, The Editor (RBL) Donation, England's Standard, 15 Alfriston Park, Seaford, East Sussex, BN25 3LS. To learn more about The Royal Society of St George log onto to the website, www.royalsocietyofstgoerge.com or write to The Royal Society of St George, Administration Centre, 127 Sandgate Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT20 2BH.



ITS CHRISTMAS DAY – ALL IS SECURE

It was the night before Christmas, he lived all alone
In a one bedroom house made of plaster and stone
I had come down the chimney with presents to give
And to see just who in this home did live.

I looked all about, a strange sight I did see
No tinsel, no presents, not even a tree
No stocking by the mantle, just boots filled with sand
On the wall hung pictures of far distant lands
With medals and badges, awards of all kinds.
A sober thought came through my mind.

For this house was different, it was dark and dreary.
I found the home of a soldier, once I could see clearly
The soldier lay sleeping, silent, alone.
Curled up on the floor in this one bedroom home.

The face was so gentle, the room in such disorder
Not how I pictured a lone British soldier
Was this the hero of whom I'd just read
Curled up on a poncho, the floor for a bed?

I realised the families that I saw this night
Owned their lives to these soldiers who were willing to fight
Soon, round the world, the children would play
And grownups would celebrate a bright Christmas day.

They all enjoyed freedom each month of the year
Because of the soldiers, like the one lying here.
I couldn't help wonder how many, alone,
On a cold Christmas even in a land far from home.

The very thought brought a tear to my eye.
I dropped to my knees and started to cry
The soldier awakened and I heard a rough voice
'Santa don't cry, this life is my choice.

I fight for freedom, I don't ask for more
My life is my God, my country, my corps'.
The soldier rolled over and drifted to sleep
I couldn't control it, I continued to weep.

I kept watch for hours, so silent and still
And I sat and shivered from the cold nights chill
I didn't want to leave on that cold dark night,
This guardian of honour, so willing to fight.

Then the soldier rolled over, with a voice soft and pure
Whispered 'Carry on Santa, its Christmas day – all is secure'.
One look at my watch and I knew he was right
'Merry Christmas, my friend, and to all a good night'.

GOD BLESS YOU, EVERYONE!

Finally, please have a happy, safe and charitable Christmas and remember whose birthday we are supposed to be celebrating.

'Come All Ye Faithful'

– 75 Years of Royal Christmas Messages



As political debates go, it wasn't quite Nixon versus Kennedy, but in early December two MPs locked horns over a crucial issue of the season. The Liberal Democrat Don Foster started by issuing a press release claiming 'the number of repeats on TV this Christmas has increased by a quarter since last year', and that 'people are fed up with Christmas because of repeats.' Quick as a flash, Labour's Stephen Pound shot back: 'Get a life... I read 'Twas the Night Before Christmas' to my kids every Christmas Eve. There can be a reassuring familiarity in repetition and my children really enjoy seeing old favourites again.'

I'm with Mr Pound on this one. Fashions come and go, civilisations rise and fall, but there is a comforting predictability about the Christmas TV schedules. With all the inevitable persistence of the day's ingested turkey, they have a habit of repeating on us. So this year we have the classic movie (*Gone With the Wind*), the family movie (*Shrek 2*), the old-style light entertainment show (*Strictly Come Dancing*), whilst on *Eastenders* Peggy Mitchell will doubtless still be holding out implausible hopes of a quiet family

Christmas. The bias towards nostalgia is reinforced this year with the BBC not only featuring *Doctor Who* (first broadcast in 1963), but also resurrecting *To the Manor Born* (1979).

At the centre of it all is another Christmas broadcasting institution, which has endured far longer than all the others, and which this year celebrates its 75th Anniversary. It was 1932 when King George V began the tradition, as his personal diary records with endearing understatement: 'At 3.35 I broadcast [sic] a short message of 251 words to the whole empire from Francis' room.' The prose of his message itself was nothing like as mundane, having been drafted for him by his old friend Rudyard Kipling. From a study in Sandringham House, the King told his worldwide audience: 'I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all; to men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert, or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them.'

This powerful opening set a standard which has been matched or surpassed with surprising regularity for a speech which, by necessity, must avoid issues of

direct political controversy. In 1939, with war on Germany having been declared just three months before, George VI made what is widely acknowledged as his best broadcast, citing the words of poem by Minnie Louise Haskins to offer comfort to the nation:

'I feel that we may all find a message of encouragement in the lines which, in my closing words, I would like to say to you:- "I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"

Six years later at the end of the war, The King's message reflected the new spirit of optimism that the victory brought. Despite the high bar set by Winston Churchill's wartime oratory, George VI's words of Christmas 1945 stand up surprisingly well as a rallying cry to postwar Britain: 'Have faith in life at its best and bring to it your courage, your hopes and your sense of humour. For merriment is the birthright of the young. But we can all keep it in our hearts as life goes on, if we hold fast by the spirit that refuses to admit defeat; by the faith that never falters; by the hope that cannot be quenched. Let us have no fear of the future but think of it as opportunity and adventure.'

In 1952, following the death of the King, the new Queen Elizabeth II's first broadcast stressed continuity with the past as she said: 'Each Christmas, at this time, my beloved father broadcast a message to his people in all parts of the world... As he used to do, I am speaking to you from my own home, where I am spending Christmas with my family.' She then turned her attention to the full breadth of her audience:

'But we belong, you and I, to a far larger family. We belong, all of us, to the British Commonwealth and Empire, that immense union of

nations, with their homes set in all the four corners of the earth. Like our own families, it can be a great power for good - a force which I believe can be of immeasurable benefit to all humanity.'

Over half a century later, the language of empire is completely alien to us, but the idea of the Commonwealth which has grown out of that old empire has been a constant theme of the Queen's broadcasts, as it has of her Reign. She has returned to it again and again as a tangible example of the importance of the Christmas message of 'peace on earth'. Her 1970 broadcast, for example, was little short of evangelical in its celebration of the Commonwealth ideal:

'Never before has there been a group of independent nations linked in this way by their common history and continuing affection... The strength of the Commonwealth lies in its history and the way people feel about it. All those years through which we have lived together have given us an exchange of people and ideas which ensures that there is a continuing concern for each other. That, very simply, is the message of Christmas - learning to be concerned about one another; to treat your neighbour as you would like him to treat you; and to care about the future of all life on earth.'

No-one reading those words can be in any doubt about the passion The Queen feels for the Commonwealth and how seriously she takes her role as its Head. Despite the cosy staging and quaint custom which has come to surround her Christmas message, we should not overlook its historic and political significance. Here is a regular, direct address by the British Head of State, in words which are, despite plentiful advice from Ministers and advisers, ultimately her own. In a world where politicians' eagerness to get on television is often in inverse proportion to the value of what they have to say, those few minutes on Christmas Day merit a closer look. If we clear away the haze of indifference and sherry through which we usually watch it, we gain a fascinating perspective both on the changes in Britain over the last fifty years, and The Queen's own personal values, underpinned by her strong religious faith.

In 1956, as immigration from former colonies was in its early stages and the failed Hungarian uprising led 20,000 people to seek asylum from Soviet persecution, The Queen took a highly progressive view: 'Particularly on this day of the family festival let us remember those who - like the Holy Family before them - have been driven from their homes by war or violence. We call them 'refugees': let us give them a true refuge: let us see that for them and their children there is room at the Inn.'

In 1983 - a year before Bob Geldof conceived Band Aid - The Queen argued 'the greatest problem in the world today remains the gap between rich and poor countries and we shall not begin to close this gap until we hear less about nationalism and more about interdependence.'

And for a monarch who has sometimes been criticised for a lack of emotion in her public utterances, some of her early messages were strikingly emotive. I submit two extracts- one from 1955, another from 1956:

'The Christmas message to each of us is indivisible; there can be no "Peace on earth" without "Goodwill toward men". Scientists talk of 'chain reaction' - of power releasing yet more power. This principle must be most true when it is applied to the greatest power of all: the power of love.'

'there comes a moment when, for the sake of ultimate harmony, the healing power of tolerance, comradeship and love must be allowed to play its part. I speak of a tolerance that is not indifference, but is rather a willingness to recognise the possibility of right in others; of a comradeship that is not just a sentimental memory of good days past, but the certainty that the tried and staunch friends of yesterday are still in truth the same people today; of a love that can rise above anger and is ready to forgive.'

Wise words indeed, and I challenge anyone reading them today to argue they have not stood the test of time. There are many more such surprising gems in the 54 Christmas messages I have read in compiling this article, and I cannot do justice to them all. But for the last word, I go back to the 1962 broadcast.

Technology was racing ahead, and the world's first communications satellite had been launched, giving The Queen a perfect metaphor to reflect on the significance of Christmas in the modern world:

'How is it, people wonder, that we are forever seeking new worlds to conquer before we have properly put our own house in order? Some people are uncertain which star to follow, or if any star is worth following at all. What is it all for, they ask, if you can bounce a telephone conversation or a television picture through the skies and across the world, yet still find lonely people living in the same street?...'

'The wise men of old followed a star: modern man has built one. But unless the message of this new star is the same as theirs our wisdom will count for nought. Now we can all say the world is my neighbour and it is only in serving one another that we can reach for the stars. God bless you all.'



Nigel Fletcher is a policy adviser in the Conservative Research Department and a Councillor in the London Borough of Greenwich.

Britishness is the tolerance and celebration of difference

by Ryan Shorthouse

Cricket, snobbery, strawberries, football hooligans, castles, the Monarchy, factories, Parliament, Black Cabs, terrace houses, rolling green fields. Britain is renowned for events and institutions which, taken together, conjure a very contradictory image. We are an island full of hypocrisies. Dominated by a liberal press but still governed by 92 hereditary peers. A people obsessed with owning their own property, but frequently indifferent to other peoples right to rule their own countries. A metropolitan elite with second homes and biannual ski holidays living relatively harmoniously with vast numbers of welfare dependents in council estates ruled by guns and gangs. And, of course, Britain is not one nation, but four.

Britain has many faces. But this has never been a problem. We have never had- unlike our major allies- a civil war, revolution, separation or dictatorship in our recent history. This is because Britons tolerate and love difference. It is this which is one of the central facets of Britishness.

Our tolerance stems from a political and legal system that puts at its heart the rights of the individual: habeas corpus, freedom of association, free speech, the right to move, freedom from discrimination, the right to own a property. Above all, there is a consensus by all political parties that a chief aim of Government is to guarantee or deliver services that provide people with the opportunity to achieve their full potential. As political scientist Professor Vernon Bogdanor says, the dominant ethic of British society is that of individual aspiration. It is the defence and promotion of individualism in Britain that has created

a culture of respecting the preferences of others. Live and let live.

But Britishness is not just the tolerance of difference, it is its celebration. Since individualism is held with such high regard, we are deeply resentful of interference within our private domain. And so independence and eccentricity has thrived. The postman always wears trousers two sizes too short for him. Mr and Mrs Peterson eat breakfast alfresco in their home. And little Jack likes collecting copies of the minutes of the monthly parish council meeting.

Just as Britons are an eclectic mix of individuals, the individuals themselves seem to behave inconsistently. Tweed trousers from Ralph Lauren with a BHS black jumper. Mild-mannered at the dinner table but overly competitive on the squash court. Originally from India, but sounding more like pre-1900 London. Active in community life but extremely conservative when it comes to spending the pounds. A British man is himself a walking contradiction. So among the differences that exist between people, what unites us all and makes us instantaneously recognisable to the foreigner is our quirkiness and eccentricity.

Britons love non-conformity. Our Monarchy stayed when others fell to republicanism. We continue to drive on the left. And we like drinking pints, reluctant to undergo complete metrification. We simply like being different.

Gordon Brown is looking for a statement of British values. Tolerance and a love of difference will be at the top of the list. But why waste time on this exercise? For most newcomers,

they know what Britishness is. It is why they came here in the first place. It is their chance to be different, live a new life. The son of Chinese parents and born in New Zealand, Professor Stephen Chan from SOAS sums it up perfectly: "I always walk to Westminster and pay my respect to the Houses of Parliament for letting me live as a different person".

Perhaps Gordon Brown needs to be worrying more about what makes him British. The electorate are looking for that little someone different from the rest to represent Britain on the world stage. Blair had that wonderful combination of being well-educated but accessible to the Worcestershire woman. Thatcher was a Grocers-girl from Grantham done good, behaving like a Victorian lady. Both made Britain a distinctive and effective player on the world stage. Does Gordon Brown represent British eccentricity enough to be a successful statesman? And as for the British trait of tolerance- a reputation for being a control freak and the terrible "British jobs for British workers" slogan show a Prime Minister who is quite un-British.

Ryan Shorthouse is a Political Researcher and Assistant Editor of Cross Bow.

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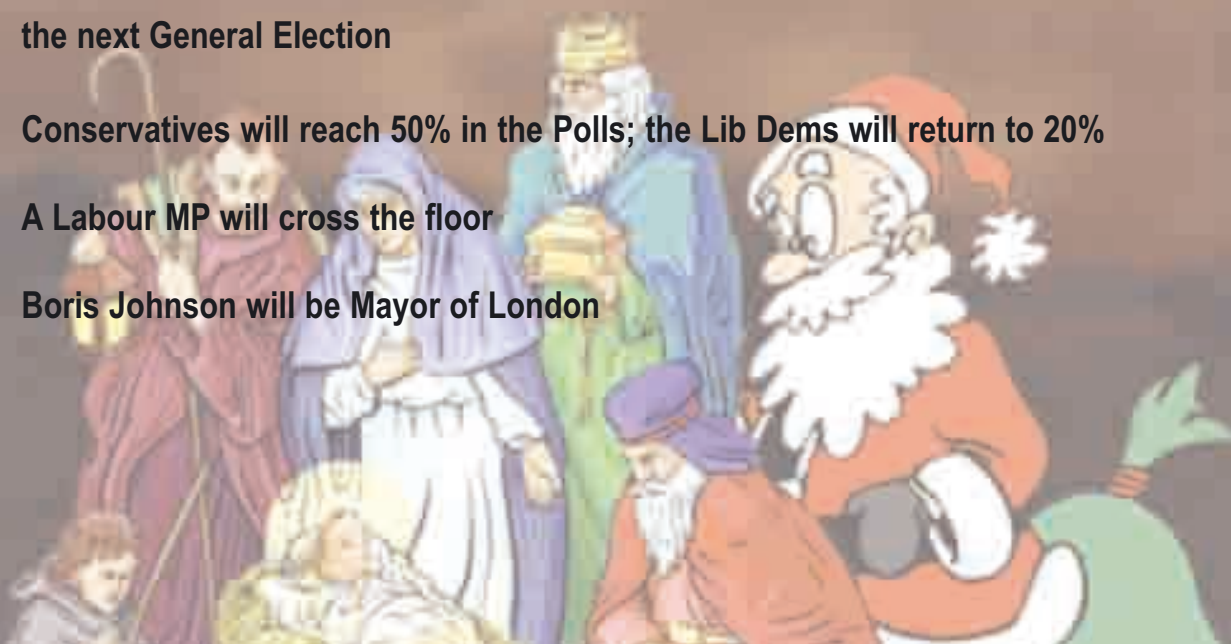
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The CrossBow Oracle's Top Ten Political predictions for 2008

-tick them off as they happen!

- 1. Charles Clarke will attempt to secure a vote of no confidence against Gordon Brown
- 2. House prices will fall by 15%
- 3. Some Police Officers will strike
- 4. Ed Vaizey and Maria Miller will make the Shadow Cabinet
- 5. George Bush will ask for international support to invade Iran
- 6. Hilary Clinton will be the next US President
- 7. Nick Clegg will announce his willingness to forge a LibDem-Conservative Coalition after the next General Election
- 8. Conservatives will reach 50% in the Polls; the Lib Dems will return to 20%
- 9. A Labour MP will cross the floor
- 10. Boris Johnson will be Mayor of London



***The Bow Group wishes all its
members and Crossbow readers
a very happy 2008***