

RUTH DAVIDSON SPEECH – 15/05/2017

Nationalism should not be confused with patriotism

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to have been asked to give this lecture this evening.

Honoured personally but particularly so because the very invitation is sign of how the world has changed, I believe for the better.

Apart from being the great novelist we know, George Orwell was a guardian of language and democracy. A foreteller of future perils. A man of the left.

He was also an old Etonian and I have had a few run-ins with them over the years.

Yet, I stand here as a Conservative to give this lecture in his honour.

The first Conservative politician to be asked to do so.

Such a thing is evolution and testimony to his enduring legacy.

I do not kid myself that he would approve.

Saying – as he did – that politicians employ language “make murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

Goodness knows what he’d make of the current election campaign.

But I want to step back from the general election, if only for an hour, and attempt to discuss one element of that legacy.

And as a subject matter, I’ve chosen what we might now call the politics of identity; or the question of nationalism and patriotism.

It was Orwell who wrote that the two should not be confused.

I would like to use this speech to examine the differences between the two – and how we need to combat the narrow nationalism of our times and find a more pluralist patriotic way forward.

And I’d like to talk about own experience as a politician in Scotland –

- as someone who, for more than five years, has been contesting a constitutional battle where identity politics has become the staples of our debate.

So – to begin with – if we are going to discuss this evening the difference between patriotism and nationalism, then I think we should begin with defining exactly what we mean.

What, first, of patriotism.

For Orwell, patriotism was devotion to a particular place “which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people.”

For me, patriotism is the acceptance that one might just as easily have come from Brazil as Britain...

But which, at the same time, recognises that – since we are here, in Britain, and since we all happened to be born on this particular set of rocky islands on the north-west corner of Europe – let us celebrate it and feel pride in that fact. Let's cheer Mo Farrah to victory. But let's make sure we stick around to watch Usain Bolt break another record, too. As Orwell suggests, patriotism is worn lightly. It doesn't impose itself. It doesn't take itself too seriously.

It is to want the UK to succeed in Eurovision. But to shrug when Bulgaria gives us nul point.

Patriotism celebrates plurality.

There's nothing in my love of dogs that makes me want to rise up against people who prefer cats.

There's nothing in the joy of being a liberated gay woman in 21st century Britain that makes me oppose heterosexual men. As long as they take the bins out....

To be patriotically British does not mean that we must oppose others.

Indeed, patriotism celebrates difference and messiness. We can be proudly Scottish, Welsh, Bajan or Pakistani, at the same time as enjoying our Britishness.

Patriotism does not force us to rank these identities in order, as if one or other has a higher claim.

I'm proud to be Scottish and British. I'm proud to be Scottish and British and to have campaigned to for the UK to remain within the EU. I'm proud to be Scottish and British and female and gay and Christian and Conservative and a Fifer and fond of chips, a fan of Hamilton the musical and to prefer dogs to cats ... and so on.

Patriotism simply says: Here's great. Come on in, the water's lovely.

Patriotism is, in this respect, a positive thing; a thing that can be shared and joined, that does not set barriers, but celebrates our place in the world.

If that is patriotism, how should we define nationalism?

Words are powerful beasts, and this one — nationalism — appears, at first glance, to be a near synonym for patriotism.

Indeed, for many, the two are completely interchangeable.

For Orwell, however, they were very different.

Orwell was writing about nationalism in 1945, at a time when the impact of aggressive nationalism was of a different order to anything we may face today.

And his definition of nationalism was not solely referring to nationhood or attachment to a government

– rather nationalism was, in his view, the process of sinking of one’s individuality into a bigger unit: be that a country, or a political ideology or a religion.

He defined it as the assertion that this unit should be promoted above all else as inherently virtuous – and that that which was not this unit was without such virtue.

“By nationalism,” he wrote, “I mean first of all the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled ‘good’ or ‘bad’.”

He continued: nationalism is “the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests.”

Orwell is describing nationalism as a form of what today we would call *Identity Politics*, of which he is clearly not a fan.

It is a state of mind which, by definition, cannot tolerate plurality.

It is a state of mind where one ideology, one myth, must take precedence over all else and which demands people support one camp or another.

- and if you’re unwilling to make that decision, nationalists will be perfectly happy to make it for you.

Indeed, such a dividing-up of the populace — treating them like *insects* to be speared onto a display board — takes the force of a *moral imperative*.

Orwell again:

“As nearly as possible, no nationalist ever thinks, talks, or writes about anything except the superiority of his own power unit. It is difficult if not impossible for any nationalist to conceal his allegiance.”

In short, if patriotism is a celebration of accidental geography – of the randomness of life;

...nationalism is the assertion that your place, your view, your belief demands pre-eminence above all else.

They are, I’d suggest, not so much synonyms as near polar opposites.

....

Now - I want to say something now which I suspect will get me into trouble, especially this close to an election.

It is this: unfortunately when it comes to nationalism, Orwell has us all skewered, me included.

Because very few of us, particularly those of us involved in politics, can really say we do not exhibit to some degree an element of these characteristics ourselves.

Politicians – by our very nature – divide into camps.

Our camp, we declare, is where all wisdom, morality, energy and decency resides.

We assert that nothing but perfidy lies in the other.

This is the nature of party politics - particularly three weeks out from an election.

So – hands up. George, you got me.

But it's not just politicians, Orwell has us all bang to rights.

We are, all of us, a tribal species.

In our effort to make sense of the world, it is simply easier to draw the boundaries of our own identities with our rejection of the “other”.

And a further uncomfortable truth that Orwell hit upon seventy years ago is that, for some of us, that nationalist instinct is stronger than for others.

To be specific, I speak of we Scots.

Which MP said in his speech to Parliament: “Every Scotsman should be a Scottish nationalist”.

Not Alex Salmond, But John Buchan. Author of the Thirty-Nine Steps and a Unionist Party MP for the combined Scottish Universities.

He went on to add ““If it could be proved that a Scottish parliament were desirable ... Scotsmen should support it.” Thus showing that even in the early days, Unionists could be devolutionists too...

So, if that's what the Unionists thinks....then you get the idea.

In short, nationalism runs deep in Scotland - particularly when, as is often the case, your football or rugby team is once again getting hammered.

Indeed, on such occasions, I am sorry to have to report that even the most passionate pro-Union Scot may have questioned the fortune and parentage of large swathes of the English population.

In short, nationalism is a part of the Scottish psyche - and it would only be hypocritical to deny it.

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But the challenge laid by Orwell is how we react.

Do we submit before this nationalist instinct and the Either / Or dichotomy which it demands of us?

Or do we follow the path of patriotism – where our love of what is ours does not rely upon the ‘othering’ of what is not.

Like all great writers, the questions posed by Orwell are timeless.

And it seems to me that far from fading over time; this one demands our direct attention now.

Whether it is due to the perceived failure of globalisation, or simply the aftershocks of the financial crash, we all know that the nationalist impulse has strengthened once again in recent years.

In America, in Britain, in France and all across Europe – we see it.

That in order to rise again, others must be put down.

That we cannot build a home – unless there is a wall around it too.
Nationalist arguments, dressed up in patriotic garb, but the same old snake oil all the same.

Intentionally blurring the line between the country and the party.

Being the vessel by which the nation is made whole.

Whether it's Trump's crie de coer to "Make America Great Again"

Le Pen's appropriation "in the name of the people," or the Austrian Freedom Party's "For Austria with heart and soul"

Each chose a presidential campaign slogan setting themselves up as the saviour of the nation, the people, the culture the land.

Those not of the tribe became - not serious people with differing ideas and policy platforms by which the country could advance – but were portrayed as opponents of progress, threats to nation or betrayers of people.

The arguments and were not fully examined and tested – the message carriers were simply othered. Easier to undermine than to engage.