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Being British Today: British Social Attitudes reveals the public's view on Britishness, immigration and the State of The Union

Debates about identity, integration and inclusion have rarely left the headlines this year. We have witnessed politicians disagreeing over immigration, Scottish independence and what it means to be British. But what do the British public think about these issues? In NatCen's 31st annual report on public attitudes we uncover how Britain feels about itself - its boundaries, its identity, and its inhabitants.

Hard to be British

NatCen's survey examines what the British public see as most important in determining whether or not someone is 'truly British'. The findings show that the British public expect someone who is British to speak English, to have lived here for most of their life and to have been born in Britain.

- **Speaking the lingo:** Almost everyone (95%) says that to be "truly British" you must be able to speak English.
- **Home sweet home:** Over three quarters (77%) say you must have lived in Britain for most of your life to be 'truly British'.
- **British born:** Around three quarters (74%) say it is important to have been born in Britain to be considered British.
- **Of British stock:** Around half (51%) say it's important to have British ancestry.
- **A Christian country?** Less than a quarter (24%) say you need to be Christian to be considered British.

The survey shows that little changed between 1995 and 2003, when we last asked these questions, but since then the British public have become more likely to expect someone who is British to speak English and live here.

- In 2003, 86% thought it was important that someone spoke English if they were to be considered 'truly British'; now 95% think this.
- The proportion who say you must have lived in Britain for most of your life has gone up from 69% to 77%.
- There have also been small increases in the proportions who think it important to have British ancestry, feel British and be born in Britain.

Tough on immigrants

So, if three quarters of people think you have to be born in Britain to be truly British, what do they think about those who have recently arrived? The survey shows a lot of anxiety about so-called "benefits tourism" and a public more worried about immigrants committing crime.

- 61% of British people think that immigrants from the EU should have to wait three years or more before they are allowed to claim welfare benefits.
- Half of all people (50%) think the main reason immigrants come to Britain is to work, but nearly a quarter (24%) think the main reason is to claim benefits - a higher proportion than think they come mainly to study, to join their family or seek asylum. Those most concerned about immigration are more likely to think that immigrants come to Britain to claim benefits.

- There has been a considerable fall, from 40% in 2003 to 27% now, in the number of people who believe legal immigrants who are not British citizens should have the same legal rights as British citizens.
- More people than a decade ago think that immigrants increase crime rates (43% in 2013, up from 37% in 2003).

But there is also a divide in British society on immigration and a lack of public awareness of the points based system introduced by government to regulate immigration from outside of the EU.

- Those who are better off and better educated are far more positive about immigration than the rest of the population. 60% of graduates think immigration has benefited Britain economically, compared with 17% of those with no qualifications.
- There is also a geographical divide, with 54% of Londoners taking the view that immigration is good for the economy compared with 28% of people around the rest of the country.
- Even though a points based immigration system designed to favour skilled migrants was introduced in 2008, two fifths of people (42%) say that the UK does not have a points based system governing migration from outside the EU and 14% say they don't know if there is one.

Let down by democracy

A huge majority (85%) of the British public also believe that to be “truly British” it is important to respect Britain’s political institutions and laws. However, there is a considerable discrepancy between the public’s expectations and their perceptions of what British democracy actually delivers. A sizeable minority of people perceive a ‘democratic deficit’ in Britain.

- Although, on average people give a mark of 8 out of 10 when asked how free and fair they think British elections are, they give a mark of only 6 out of 10 when asked whether they think the courts treat people fairly – or whether the media provide information that is sufficiently reliable to judge the government.
- The British public are especially sceptical of the government’s ability to explain decisions to voters and to protect citizens from poverty. People in Britain give an average mark of over 8 out of 10 when asked how important these things are in a democracy - but one of just 5 out of 10 when asked how far they are achieved in practice.

Penny Young, Chief Executive, NatCen Social Research, said: “In an increasingly diverse, multi-cultural country, we might expect people to be more relaxed about what it means to be British, yet the trend is going in the opposite direction. It is now harder to be considered British than in the past and one message comes through loud and clear, if you want to be British, you must speak English.

And as we debate whether UKIP’s vote will hold up in the General Election, British Social Attitudes shows that the public is yet to be convinced that politicians have got a grip on immigration. They want tougher rules on benefits and many are unaware of the policies that are in place to control immigration.”

Scottish independence: An amicable break-up?

This year, NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey also takes a look at the debate about Scottish independence and what the public north and south of the border think about some of the key issues in that debate. It reveals that in some of the instances where the current Scottish Government would like to keep a relationship with the rest of

the UK, the public on both sides of the border support continuing collaboration. Most people in Scotland say that in the event of independence they would want to keep the BBC and the Queen, and a majority of people in England are happy with this too.

- **Queen and country:** 62% in Scotland think an independent Scotland should keep the same King or Queen as England; 65% in England and Wales agree.
- **Auntie is best:** 86% of people in Scotland would like to be able to carry on watching the BBC after independence, while 82% of those in England and Wales think they definitely or probably should be allowed to do so.

Most people in Scotland would also like to keep the Pound, though on this public opinion in England and Wales is more equivocal (if not necessarily as strongly opposed as is sometimes portrayed).

- **Political currency:** Eight in ten (79%) Scots think they should continue to use the pound. Only 38% of people in England and Wales told our BSA interviewers that they should 'definitely' be able to do so, though another 31% reckoned they 'probably' should.

But attitudes in other areas could make agreement on a break-up of the Union a tricky prospect. All British people seem dubious about the possible compromise of allowing people in an independent Scotland to claim both Scottish and British citizenship, while a future UK Government may be under pressure from people in England and Wales to remove Trident from Scotland.

- Around half of Scots (47%) think they should be able to claim both a British and a Scottish passport should Scotland become independent, while only one in three (33%) people in England and Wales think they should be able to do so.
- Scots are split on whether Britain's nuclear weapons should continue to be based in Scotland should it become independent. Although the Scottish Government wants Trident moved, 41% think it should stay in Scotland, and 37% disagree. However 63% of English and Welsh people think it should be moved elsewhere should Scotland become independent.

Prof John Curtice, NatCen Social Research, said: "If Scotland does vote to leave the United Kingdom, Scotland and England will have to find ways of getting along with each other. In some instances, such as the monarchy and the BBC, there appears to be a willingness on both sides of the border to share institutions.

Even on the issue on which the Scottish and UK governments have been most obviously at loggerheads – on the prospect of an independent Scotland sharing the pound – public opinion in England and Wales may not necessarily be as hostile to the idea as has sometimes been suggested. However, those living in the rest of the UK might want Trident moved out of Scotland irrespective of whether a future Scottish government is willing to keep the nuclear weapons facility on its shores or not."

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- **NatCen Social Research**, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).
- **British Social Attitudes: the 31st Report** is published on 17 June 2014 and is freely available at: www.bsa-31.natcen.ac.uk
- **The editors** are Alison Park, John Curtice and Caroline Bryson.
- **History** –The British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted annually since 1983. Since then around 90,000 people have taken part in the survey.
- **Sample and approach** – The 2013 survey consisted of 3,244 interviews with a representative, random sample of adults in Britain. Interviewing was mainly carried out between June and September 2013, with a small number of interviews taking place in October and November. Addresses are randomly selected and visited by one of NatCen Social Research's interviewers. After selecting one adult at the address (again at random), the interviewer carries out an hour long interview. Most questions are answered by the participant selecting an answer from a set of cards. The Democracy chapter was mainly based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS, recently established as a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC), is a biennial survey of social attitudes and behaviour which has been carried out in up to 36 European countries since 2001. www.europeansocialsurvey.org. The Scotland and Independence referendum chapters included data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey.
- **Topics** – the topics covered by the survey change from year to year, depending on the identities and interests of its funders. Some questions are asked every year, others every couple of years, and others less frequently.
- **Funding** – The survey is funded by a range of charitable and government sources, which change from year to year. Questions in the 2013 survey were funded by the following: the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Government Equalities Office, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, The King's Fund, the Economic and the Social Research Council (ESRC), Unbound Philanthropy, the Trust for London, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.
- The **views expressed** in this report are those of the report authors and editors alone.
- The 31st Report includes the following **chapters**:
 - Democracy: Critical consensus? Britain's expectations and evaluations of democracy (Sarah Butt and Rory Fitzgerald)
 - Scotland: Can Scotland and the rest of the UK get along? (John Curtice)
 - Independence referendum: A question of identity, economics or equality (John Curtice)
 - National identity: Exploring Britishness (Zsolt Kiss and Alison Park)
 - Immigration: A nation divided? (Robert Ford and Anthony Heath)
 - Benefits and the cost of living: Pressures on the cost of living and attitudes to benefit claiming (Ben Baumberg)
- Data on **NHS satisfaction** were released in May 2014 by The King's Fund.