

Sion Jobbins Column

England's steadily emerging identity will lead to the Scandanavianisation rather than the Balkanisation of the British Isles.

I had a novel experience watching the 2007 Rugby World Cup a few months ago. For the first time ever I wasn't supporting ATBE (any team but England). Whilst I didn't rush out to buy a Cross of Saint George flag, I'd go as far as saying that I would have been quite glad had the English retained the Webb Ellis Trophy.

I've traditionally taken the ATBE position not through anti-English xenophobia but for political reasons. Were I, and thousands of other Welsh people to support England, the media and political class wouldn't applaud us for our cultural generosity but would see the equation; the Welsh support England, ergo, the Welsh are essentially English. Not supporting England is an easy-to-read way of making the point, 'we're Welsh, don't take us for granted'.

Which brings me back to my surprising Damascene revelation. My relaxed attitude towards English success at this exciting World Cup of underdogs had nothing to do with a new-found feeling of Brownite Great-British nationalism and nor am I comfortable with English flags flying in Wales. After all, the first recorded use of the St George's Cross as an emblem of England was in a Roll of Accounts relating to Edward I's war of 1275 against Welsh independence - his Drang nach Westen. How would the Poles feel seeing the Teutonic flag fluttering over the rooftops of Warsaw? Seeing English flags flying in Aberystwyth is a sign of an English cultural, linguistic and economic power dwarfing a weak Welsh identity — it's like Edward's army was back in town.

But I do now enjoy the bittersweet irony that the success of the England rugby team, and my support for that success, far from strengthening the Great British narrative, undermines it. With every drop-goal Jonny Wilkinson kicked in France the ties of Britishness weakened and Englishness strengthened a little. Put simply, the stronger English sentiment becomes, the stronger becomes the call for an English parliament and with that, a stronger Welsh parliament. Since I believe that the moral purpose of creating Welsh nationality is to be a vehicle to strengthen the Welsh language and culture, and since those most hostile to the Welsh language and Welsh nationality are the one's most keen to promote Britishness, then that's good news. That's why I find myself able to support the English rugby team but not a British athletics team. Britishness claims territorial jurisdiction over Welsh culture and political aspiration, Englishness doesn't.

The rise in English self-awareness is now well documented. However, what's interesting from a Welsh point of view is the difference between English nationalism and the Welsh version. Whilst Welsh nationalism is very much part of the left-wing, idealistic epoch of the civil rights and anti-colonial movements of the 1960s, English nationalism is of today. It's a more right of centre, cynical, (or realistic - if you like) zeit-geist rooted in the politics of the new century - democracy and demography. The rest of this long article is published in the latest issue of Cambria Magazine.