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**A MOTTO FOR BRITAIN:  
A NATION IN DEFIANCE OF DEFINITION?**

The USA: *In God we trust*  
Poland: *Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna*  
The United Kingdom: *Insert motto here*

In November 2007 the new British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced that he wanted a national debate on a statement of values summing up what it means to be British. One reason for this was the demand to be made of immigrants that they take a 'citizenship test' that would check if they were able to adapt to the British way of life. If newcomers to the country could be expected to understand what Britishness is, then surely British people themselves should have no problem composing a detailed statement of British values, shouldn't they?

A very different kind of citizenship test, known as the cricket test, was proposed in the 1980s by Norman Tebbit, a key figure in Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (with support concentrated in the South of England). He simply asked who 'British' people supported when England played cricket against another country. He supposed that Britain's ethnic minorities might support the country of their origin, like Pakistan, India or the West Indies, thus making them 'not British'<sup>1</sup>. So the claim to being *British* depended on supporting *England*; which seems to rule out not only the Indian British and the Pakistani British etc. but also the Welsh British and the Scottish British, who are even less likely to support England (not to mention the millions of Anglo-Saxon English people who are simply not interested in cricket).

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, he may not have been serious about applying this test in practice but we can also learn a lot about people's way of thinking from tongue-in-cheek suggestions. The light-hearted, even irreverent, style of writing in this paper is also aimed at giving some insight into British character.

Clearly British citizenship and identity is a complex creature with many interlinked facets and capable of coexistence with other identities: something that could never be boiled down to just a few words. However journalists quickly reduced the search to one for a national motto ‘like the French *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*’, thus getting the project off to the worst possible start with the British public’s predictable reaction to being ‘like the French’. The BBC asked people for their suggestions for a national motto and published over a thousand on its website. The Times newspaper gathered and published online more than two thousand. These suggestions can tell us a lot about the character of Britain, whether they offered serious candidates for a British motto or, perhaps especially, where they offered criticism or attempted humour.

Reading through these responses<sup>2</sup> it is difficult to find serious suggestions that would work as a motto for the next few centuries. Most contributors simply took the opportunity to make satirical points about the present government – *Britain...A convenient identity to allow an unelected Scotsman to govern England*<sup>3</sup>; or immigration – *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses and I will give them council houses and money. The UK: it's Great, and you don't even have to be British!* and even *Welcome to Poland and Za naszą i waszą wolność 'For our freedom and yours'*.<sup>4</sup> The contributors also satirised emigration – *Britain: it sucks but we can't afford to move to Australia. Come on in... I'm just leaving! Would the last real Brit to leave, please put the lights out;* along with tax and other popular complaints – *If it moves, tax it: if it doesn't, tax it anyway. Political Correctness gone mad. Over-governed, over-crowded, over-taxed. Land of health and safety, careful now!*

They are actually continuing a long and, one might say ‘noble’, tradition that started in 1215 with the drafting of the Magna Carta. The nobles who wrote this document had a historic opportunity to establish a blueprint for the running of England, setting out the philosophy and fundamental principles governing the process itself by which we are governed. Instead they wrote *not a charter of liberty but a charter of liberties, in the medieval sense of exemptions: a catalogue of things that the king would not henceforth be permitted to do* (Schama 2000:141). They even included narrow and specific demands, such as article thirty-five which demanded that *the measure for wine and corn and widths of cloth and other things be improved. And so with weights*. Article thirty-nine states *No free man shall be arrested or imprisoned .....except by the lawful*

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise identified, all text in italics presents suggestions from contributors to the BBC survey.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, is Scottish (like a disproportionately large number of twentieth-century Prime Ministers) and had not yet faced a general election after succeeding Tony Blair.

<sup>4</sup> The motto of Polish soldiers exiled from the partitioned Poland and fighting in other countries’ independence movements.

*judgement of his peers or by the law of the land.* As O’Farrell (2007:114) says, *I would have put that one above the demand about widths of cloth.* Most motto contributors, like the nobles before them, simply failed to raise their sights above the petty political gripes of the day and grasp the opportunity to create something that would live on for centuries. They also failed to describe the positive and lasting characteristics, preferring to focus on negative temporary complaints. In short, they were British.

Many of those who took the request more seriously explained that any conceivable motto would fail to sum up the feelings of such a diverse nation and should be treated with suspicion as a tool for forcing us to become more uniform. The winner of a vote on the Times’ search was *No mottos please we’re British*<sup>5</sup>. Another said *We don't need a motto, just like we don't need to follow other more needy countries in desperately seeking to entrench our national identity.* We should, they believe, stay *vague and happy.* *Britishness: We don't know what it is either* was a very typical point along with *Britain doesn't do mottos, but if they did, they would probably be the best mottos in the world*<sup>6</sup>. The only motto we could agree on is none at all. The British have always been suspicious of ‘big ideas’ and ideologies. It came as no surprise in Britain that the 1789 French revolution, with its wonderful sounding ideals of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, was quickly followed by the dictatorship of Napoleon; as was actually foreseen by Edmund Burke (1790:342) even though he was a radical who had supported American independence<sup>7</sup>. History repeated itself with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia leading to Stalin’s rule of mass murder. British history had already given us a taste of this with the seventeenth century civil war creating a Puritan ‘New Jerusalem’, which actually allowed Oliver Cromwell to behave far worse than the executed king had ever done. Since then the British have instinctively mistrusted anyone with clear ideas of what the nation stands for and how it should be structured. That is why we have stumbled into a series of piecemeal alterations that have left us with:

- a national anthem that doesn’t mention the nation,
- a flag representing England, Scotland and *Wales* that is made up of the flags of England, Scotland and *Ireland*,

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<sup>5</sup> An allusion to a 1970s farce play and film *No sex please we’re British*

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, this use of ‘do’ has been very popular in recent years. It allows for substitution of any active verb when describing a habit one doesn’t follow. Eg. ‘He’s always late. He doesn’t do time’ (with stress on ‘do’).

<sup>7</sup> He predicted that the Revolution’s disorder would make the army ‘mutinous and full of faction’, then a ‘popular general’, commanding the army’s loyalty, would become ‘master of your assembly, the master of your whole republic’. Napoleon’s coup d’état took place nine years later. Not many things make an Englishman as happy as being able to say ‘told you so’. And having to translate it into French is an added bonus.

- a Christian monarch who is barred from marrying a Catholic but completely free to marry an atheist, a witch or a Satanist,
- a (frequently *Scottish*) UK Prime Minister who chooses the Archbishops of the Church of *England*, which is the state Church of the *United Kingdom*,
- government ministers (of education, health, environment etc.) who are supposed to represent the *UK* when they attend EU meetings, but are actually only responsible for that issue in *England*.

It is a mess; but would the British like somebody to come and clean it up and impose their ‘vision’ in its place? Not on your life. Because, we fear, it might actually cost you your life.

Five of the contributors to the BBC search helpfully pointed out that in fact the UK already has a motto. However they less helpfully gave five different versions of what it was. Depending on who you believe, the British motto is *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense* ‘*Evil be to him who thinks evil of it*’ (the motto of the fourteenth century Order of the Garter); *Dieu et Mon Droit* ‘*God and my right*’ (which is on the Royal Coat of Arms); *God Save The Queen* (the national anthem); *Rule Britannia* (an alternative anthem popular in the nineteenth century) or *Fidei Defensis* ‘*Defender of the Faith*’ (the title given to Henry VIII by the Pope, kept by subsequent monarchs and printed on pound coins). Of these only *Rule Britannia* actually applies to Britain, the remaining are only relevant to England or the Royal family. In fact the first on the list is the motto of England and we can also find mottos for Scotland *In My Defens God Me Defend* and *Nemo Me Impune Lacessit* ‘*No one provokes me with impunity*’; Wales *Cymru Am Byth* (Welsh) ‘*Wales forever*’ and *Y Ddraig Goch Ddyry Cychwyn* ‘*The Dragon Gives Impetus*’ and Northern Ireland *Quis Separabit* ‘*Who will separate us?*’.

Characteristically, very few contributors made reference to the mottos of other countries, which is a shame as we can find some interesting comparisons. *Unity*, or a derivative thereof, appears in the mottos of over twenty percent of countries in the world, most often in the mottos *Unity is strength* (eight countries<sup>8</sup>). This is also the motto of countless trade unions and Labour Parties around the world, making it clearly too partisan for Britain, which has never been enthusiastic about political solidarity. Surely *Unity in diversity* (three countries<sup>9</sup> and the European Union) would suit the UK, but the fact that the EU has already taken it would make it unacceptable to many. The contributors might also have considered Bermuda’s *Quo fata ferunt* ‘*Wither the fates carry us*’, Luxemburg’s *We wish to remain what we are*, 18<sup>th</sup> century Prussia’s *Suum cuique*

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<sup>8</sup> Belgium, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Georgia, Bolivia, Malaysia, Haiti and South Africa until 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and South Africa after 2000. The USA also has a similar alternative motto *E Pluribus Unum* ‘*Out of many, one*’.

'To each his own', or even Botswana's *Rain*; though the latter, in a country that is seventy percent desert, is probably aspirational whereas in Britain it would be purely descriptive.

We surely could not consider Guyana's *One people, one nation, one destiny*, or Mali and Senegal's shared French motto *Un peuple, un but, une foi* 'One people, one goal, one faith'. It is also difficult to see which part of Poland's *Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna* 'God, Honour, Fatherland' would be acceptable in Britain. Certainly Oliver Cromwell's old school motto *Serve God, Honour the King* didn't help produce the kind of country we wanted. Canada's geographical description *From sea to sea* may not provide us with inspiration, but we might consider the Canadian province of British Columbia's *Splendor without diminishment*. The latter would manage the balancing act epitomised by *Kindness without weakness, humour without mockery, pride without arrogance*.

Most British people seem to feel that Britain was *Once Great, Now Second Rate*, lamenting that *A third of the world used to be ours, you know, (sigh)*, and remember that *Quondam Nos Erant Dignus* 'Once we were worthy'. The predicament of coining a new motto at this stage of our history is amply demonstrated by other countries that were *Once Great*. The two great Empires that threatened Poland from either side, Russian and German, shared with each other the same motto – *С нами Бог* 'God is with us' and *Gott mit uns* 'God with us'. Now the modern Russia and Germany (powerful certainly, but not what they were) still have something in common in having no motto at all<sup>10</sup>: how could they continue with the old one or follow it with anything else? The Austrian superpower of the nineteenth century believed *Austriae est imperare orbi universo* 'It is Austria's destiny to rule the world'. Today this middle-ranking European country has a rather less ambitious hope: *Austria Erit in Orbe Ultima* 'Austria Will Exist for Ever'. Any motto, then, would be either unrealistic (if it alluded to the greatness of our past) or too realistic for comfort (if it was brutally frank about what we can actually live up to). Who now would seriously suggest *The sun never sets in the British Empire*? Perhaps the grandest statement might be either *Nostrum maiestas est secundum nos, tamen non valde recedentia*. 'Our greatness is behind us, but not very far' or *Win, Learn, Change*. (*win=British Empire, learn=collapse of Empire, change=multicultural Britain*). The future is much less certain *The United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales* – (*Delete as appropriate*). It takes a country like Australia, with recent foundations as an enormous prison and geographical isolation only gradually eroded by

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<sup>10</sup> Some German coins contain the words *Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit*, meaning 'unity and justice and freedom' which are taken from the German national anthem, but are not an official national motto.

improving transport technology, to be able to look forward in its motto *Advance Australia*.<sup>11</sup>

Britain's deep roots also show in the language used in the mottos. One in every eight of the BBC's responses were written in Latin (only one in 250 were offered in French) to give them a classical feel. Two millennia after the Romans came to Britain, Latin is still seen as the timeless language of a higher culture. Since awareness of Latin is widespread even among those who were not made to study it at school, pseudo-Latin humour is very popular, so we have *Weatheris Miserables*, *Amamus Cuppa* 'We love Tea', *Queue Ad Infinitum* and *Gonus to dogus* 'gone to the dogs'. One contributor suggested Chaucer's English would provide an appropriately sophisticated flavour as in *God save be queen* or *Fairnesse and Equalitie*. Alternatively we could bring the language of our motto right up to date with the technological age in *Englnd – lnd of Wllm Shkspr*.

Some of the mottos suggested took inspiration from those of other countries. The list of three attributes, employed in many countries' mottos, was attempted with *Unity, industry, irony; Faith, hope, unity; For Freedom, For Liberty, For Democracy* and *King/Queen, Country and Unity*. The American motto *In God We Trust* was suggested, but a humanist responded with *In rational and scientifically tested physical phenomena we trust*. The problem was made clear by the following, much less succinct, version of the American motto offered to the BBC search:

*In one or more of the deities, spirits and/or other supernatural beings or forces in which the citizens of this nation believe (see Appendix 1 for a full list), or, for those who do not subscribe to the aforementioned beliefs, in a sense of personal morality, community and common humanity, or in any other concept or ideal in which they may believe (but only so far as these, or any other, beliefs do not impinge on the rights of any societal group, whether believing or not believing), we trust, in a spirit of inclusivity, tolerance and mutual respect.*

Perhaps as a result of this political correctness minefield many British people's preoccupations, reflected in the motto suggestions, are much more mundane. Many chose to echo the marketing phrases and obsessions with money that seem to permeate our whole waking lives. *Where there is blame there is a claim. Are you paying too much for your car insurance? Consolidate all your debt into one easy monthly payment!* More popular still are the mottos that show something of the British character. *Don't make a fuss. Give us something to moan about. We apologise for any offence caused by this motto. On the whole we would rather be further south.* Rather than God and country the British love their warm beer, tea with milk and British sausages (40% mechanically recovered

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<sup>11</sup> This is the traditional motto, whereas *Advance Australia Fair* is the National anthem.

meat, 60% ...don't ask<sup>12</sup>). One contributor even offered *Blancmange is best served cold*<sup>13</sup>. The truth is that rather than being, like the USA, *One nation under God* we are *One nation underdog*.<sup>14</sup>

The most popular suggestion on the BBC was *Mustn't grumble* which manages to capture our dogged stiff-upper-lippedness, our penchant for small talk (which holds back from being too touchy-feely) and even our obsession with the weather. *Mostly harmless* was also popular, a reference to Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series of comic science fiction books, which also included *Don't Panic*. However the latter sentiment is better summarised by *Keep Calm and Carry On* which came from a poster prepared by the government during World War II in preparation for a German invasion. This was to be the way the British would deal with Nazi occupation: just don't give them the attention they are seeking and they will get bored and stop their nonsense (this also works for a three-year-old child having a tantrum). A key feature of the British is that they are *Always together in times of need*: they may be sarcastic, self-deprecating, constantly expecting to fail and always looking at the bleakest side but they are *hilaris in adversum* '*Cheerful in adversity*'. Another contributor explained *We are British; we fight back by taking the mickey. That is our national identity, it's as old as the two fingers the British raised to the French at the battle of Agincourt*.

*Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way*<sup>15</sup> accurately depicts the feelings of disillusionment that, while perhaps widespread, are strengthened in Britain by living in a 'Great' nation that nowadays doesn't seem to live up to the name. *Lions led by donkeys* (as the Germans called the British army during the First World War) shows a feeling that the British people are better than their leaders or even their country. *We came, we saw, we conquered, then we gave it back*. *Frightfully sorry* sums up mixed feelings towards Britain's colonial past: both shame that we took the colonies and, at the same time, anger that we didn't keep them. *Mind the Gap* (an imperative broadcast on London underground trains) identifies our geographical position in relation to Europe, our penchant for thoroughly discussing problems while not solving many, along with the growing annoyance at being constantly told what to do by a so-called 'nanny state' that knows best.

Even though so many responses to this search were not serious, it is surely a historic first for a long established country to hold a democratic debate on the creation of a new motto. Other countries mottos were created by the ruling elites for their own purposes (which is what makes so many British people suspicious

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<sup>12</sup> No really. Don't ask. Just don't.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike the very similar, but very warm, Polish *budyn*.

<sup>14</sup> Notice two jokes here, reflecting our love of both dogs and underdogs.

<sup>15</sup> Taken from the Pink Floyd song *Time*

of them). The history of the USA's motto is a case in point. *E Pluribus Unum* 'from many, one' was widely considered to be the de facto national motto for most of the history of the nation. Though it had not been officially established by legislation it was highly regarded by all sections of society, due to its inclusive nature. However, in 1956 the congress deemed that 'at the present time the United States has no national motto' and imposed *In God we trust*<sup>16</sup>. This new motto was mostly aimed at distinguishing America from the officially atheist Soviet Union during the Cold War. It has, however, been very controversial as many citizens see it as conflicting with the constitutional separation of Church and State and object to the requirement to state a belief in God as part of the oath of allegiance<sup>17</sup>. The pledge of allegiance, which many pupils in American schools are required to recite, was also modified in 1954 to read *One nation under God*.

We can't deny that it is a daunting challenge producing a short motto that will sum up Britain and recognise that there are many different cultures and worldviews within. We could give up the search and keep Britain vague as most Times readers appear to want, but that would leave the country open to the charge that it is simply weak compared to more focussed and defined cultures. We could produce a motto that would please Mr. Tebbit and the established powers; however *England expects every man to do his duty* (as suggested by several contributors) might have worked well for Nelson preparing English, Welsh and Scottish sailors for the Battle of Trafalgar, but it clearly will not promote harmony in the modern UK. The only choice left to us is to produce a motto that acknowledges the contribution of the various cultures that make up the country today, but also makes clear the value of the existence of Britain. Taking inspiration, then, from the holistic philosophy movement, that is gaining deserved popularity as we begin the millennium of environmental challenges, I propose:

*Totum plus est quam summa eius partium*  
*The whole is more than the sum of its parts.*

### Internet motto sources

**BBC survey:** [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/magazinemonitor/2007/09/the\\_friday\\_challenge.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/magazinemonitor/2007/09/the_friday_challenge.shtml)

**Times survey:** <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article2852658.ece>

**Mottos of the world:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_state\\_mottos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_state_mottos)

**Creation of motto for the USA:** <http://www.nonbeliever.org/images/CR102-13917.pdf>

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<sup>16</sup> Congressional record, 1956, p.13917. This can be seen on the 'nonbeliever' webpage listed above.

<sup>17</sup> The oaths taken by holders of public office, naturalised citizens and others, end with the words ...*so help me God*.



## References

- Burke, E.** 1790. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. London: Pearson Longman (2006)
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