

The British People

— Have they changed, or have they not ? —

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Introduction

Culture is complex and so is the character of a nation, and Britain, like other advanced countries, has undergone diversity, differentiation and fragmentation in various fields. The conventional and general picture of the salient characteristics of the British people, however, we may safely say, still go as follows: the British are self-reliant, self-confident, individualistic, conservative, reserved, reticent, class-conscious, puritanistic, stoic, law-abiding, thoughtful, and patriotic; dislike overstatement, boasting, hysteria and fuss, subordination to others, and public shows of emotion; believe in the guiding star of experience; think much of personal liberty, common sense, duty, honesty, good manners, privacy, fair play, honour, gentlemanship and amateurism; have good sense of balance, compromise and humour, and so are level-headed; love home, flowers, gardening, animals, nature, sports and games; and some of them are still hypocritical, snobbish, cold, eccentric, insular and xenophobic, and muddle through their life between fear and hope, and between doubt and faith.

This picture remained quite clear until Mrs Thatcher was in power. It, or at least part of it, however, now seems to be gradually changing, triggered, among others, by the active and skilful performance of the new leader, Tony Blair, of 'Cold Britannia' and the sudden and tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales.

The hysteric and highly sentimental reaction over the death of Diana, more liberal and emotionally open 'Queen of Hearts' and 'people's princess' who showed compassion to the victimized, seemed to have negated, at least for some time, some of the above mentioned traditional British characteristics. At her death, few refrained from showing emotions publicly, few preserved a

balanced evaluation of Diana's speech and conduct, and quite a few openly protested against the 'aloofness' of the Queen and the Royal Family who were 'out of touch with ordinary people', though they did not go so far as to wail or tear their clothes in grief or anger. During the whole week from her death in Paris to the funeral in London, I, who happened to be staying in London, could not help feeling as if I were in a foreign country or in a new Britain, for what I witnessed there, ranging from the mass mourning and enormous amount of flowers offered, to the open criticism of the Queen and the Royal Family, was totally in discordance with my image of the discreet and individualistic British people. Some social changes, which had been already occurring, did seem to have taken shape all of a sudden and crystallised by Diana's death and the consequent mass hysteria of the people who showed no tight-lipped reticence.

Is Britain, then, really drastically changing now or is the weight of habit still hanging heavy enough to keep Britain as it has been? In this brief thesis I will try to see what sort of changes and non-changes there are seen at the turn of the century with what have been seen as the characteristics of the British people.

Representative traits

Times change, and we change with them. Britain has undergone in its long history Romanization of Celtic cultures, grey Middle Ages, flamboyant and exuberant 'Merry England' in the Elizabethan Age, hodden grey Puritanism during the Commonwealth, the Great Plague and the Great Fire in London in the reign of Charles II, the Merry Monarch, Enlightenment age in the 18th century, cruelty- and misery-bound but at the same time humanitarian, moral- and repentance-bound Victorian days of 'Two Nations', austere but chivalric days of the two World Wars, etc.

Have then the characteristics of the British undergone drastic changes as well? Have they sloughed off their old habits every time there appeared such big social changes as were mentioned above? The answer depends on the way how you see it: you may either magnify the changes too much or ignore them and try to pretend no such changes happened. Or also you can evade a direct

answer by asserting that our culture is mixed just as the content of our minds is and so that the life of a nation is like an iceberg with a great part of it under water, i.e., unknown in its totality.

Conservatism

It seems to me that the British people always prefer to use what is old and adapt it to new conditions. Despite the rapid changes and turmoil in economy, politics and social life, the structure of British society seems to be standing quite solid and firm in the public respect. Their medieval institutions such as Crown, Parliament and Common Law are still with them. [The Crown suffered predictions as doomy as those just after the death of Diana, for example, during Queen Victoria's excessive mourning over the loss of Albert, prince consort of the Queen, and during the 1930s Abdication crisis.] The long-running BBC Antiques Roadshow is still popular and loved by a wide range of viewers. They cannot break their links with the past; they are deeply suspicious of change for the sake of change. The British are thus a people with entrenched conservatism, but we should not forget that they are essentially a down-to-earth and practical race as well. There have always been evolutions or gradual changes, though not radical revolutions like those in France and Russia.

The past several years have seen, just to mention a few, the agreement in 1993 by the Queen to pay tax and open Buckingham Palace to the public; the revelation in detail in the same year of the work of MI5, UK's counterespionage security service; the Church of England's ordination of first woman priests in 1994, and the Londoners' backing in a referendum this year of decentralization-gearred Tony Blair's plan for a directly elected mayor for the capital; more schools opting for GM (grant-maintained) status, i.e., independence from council control; teachers wanting to be paid based on their merits; solicitors being allowed to appear in courts, etc.

We, though, have to add here that schools still start the day with an act of worship, churches and chathedrals are still important landmarks, and that the police are fighting plans to replace their traditional, archaic headgear by a reinforced plastic type of crash helmet incorporating a personal radio.

The more stabilized the politics and economy become under Tony Blair, ironically the steadiness will take the British back to their conservatism, for conservatism is an asset which can be afforded only by politically stabilized countries, and the British, originally being a fatalist, have a tendency not to get involved, leaving activism to a small minority of people.

Class consciousness

Oddly enough, a well-defined class system (with privileges and titles preserved) has been maintained in Britain along with their sense of independence and their proud, uncompromising love of individual liberty.

The British still seem to care about pedigree, names, schools, accents, houses, etc., though various opinion polls results show that going up and down the social ladder is easier these days and that they have been becoming more middle-class and less working-class. In class matters, however, placings are highly subjective and in Britain those in the middle-class tend to be reluctant to accept that they are middle-class.

The class system in Britain is not a rigid caste system, and is flexible as mentioned above. The accepted class system could be easier, more comfortable and cozier for them to live in. Most people are not on fire with ambition; they are at ease among members of their own class and find themselves living in a reasonably happy society.

During the Elizabethan period, a period of great distinctions of rank and wealth, all classes went to the play, in sharp contrast to France where the classical drama was written for the Court only. The merchant adventurers and the wars also greatly helped to 'liquefy' the rigid class system, with people with money or ranks ascending the social ladder more easily and in greater number than in any other times. (Examples are found abundantly in the biographies loved by the British people.)

The ascent and descent of the social/class ladder from one class to another was thus not impossible even in the past.

People thus have not always been fixed 'in the trade of his parent's vocation', though the parvenu(e) (upstarts) or *nouveau riche* (new rich) often seem to have suffered humiliation or contempt.

What is also interesting about the class system in Britain is that, though apparently a denial of that principle of freedom which permeates English life, it is profoundly modified by the emphasis placed upon the individual as an end in himself. There has always been a sense of individualism and spirit of self-help which have transcended differences of class, wealth, creed and politics. As Barker says, “The Englishman thinks of himself first as an individual with specific rights (and consequently with specific duties) and only secondly as a member of a class, religious group, or other social unit.”¹

Snobbery, sensitiveness to better social example, a universal phenomenon, used to be perhaps more especially British, as the prestige of the nobility was accepted by the middle class. But it is not so conspicuous as in the past due to the diminished nobility (because of structural changes in economy and society, heavy death duty (a tax on property inheritances), etc.) and a variety of values. As we have seen above, the borders between the classes are now easier to cross and more and more people are feeling middle class.

Understatement

The British have always tended to dislike exaggeration, boasting and overstatement, and the respectable Englishmen were supposed never to wear their hearts on their sleeves. But now, the habit of hiding feelings under a cloak of indifference, which sometimes was taken for hypocrisy, seems to be dying out, which was clearly shown in the mass hysteria and mourning after the death of Diana. (In this sense, Arthur Bryant must have been right when he said, “The Englishman in fact hides his emotions, not because he lacks emotion, but he has got too much.”²)

This trend, one would like to argue, was also conspicuously illustrated in Tony Blair’s State of the Union like speech this summer on the annual report on the achievements of what he described as a “radical, reforming” government and the Labour Party’s Americanized political convention this autumn in which delegates arrived with ‘balloons’, ready to release them when the leader spoke.³

Bitten-in Puritanism, stoicism, self-denial

These characters, which used to suppress the lusts of the flesh, regulate one's life by stern value, and give oneself over to an inexorable purpose (and thus contributed to the making of good English merchants), also seem to be dying out. The disappearance of the stiff upper lip was clearly shown at the death of Diana, which crystallised a number of changes in British values and traits.

In matters of sexual behaviour as well, they are much more relaxed and tolerant. The moral stigmas once attached to 'irregular liaisons', divorce, cohabitation, birth outside marriage, homosexual relationships, etc. are now nearly on the point of vanishing.

The traditional stoicism is also disappearing, gradually replaced by the Epicureanism, not only in eating habits but also in many other fields. This trend may have been brought about by the systematic replacement of thought and seriousness by feelings and sentimentalism in various fields such as media, politics, and education.

Gentlemanship and chivalry

Britain, a country of chivalric Arthurian legends ruled by gentlemen squires from the reign of William III to the reign of Queen Victoria, has tended to see herself the champion of the weak and helpless against the arrogant strong or ill fortune.

From Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) passing his water bottle to a dying soldier when in desperate need of it himself, Captain Oates (d.1912) walking into the blizzard to his death to save Captain Scott and his companions, to Grace Darling (1815-42) who in 1838 courageously rescued the sailors of a wrecked ship, and the chivalric self-sacrificing crew on *The Titanic* who went down with the ship in 1912, Britain has a pantheon of chivalric heroes. (Diana's open-handed compassion and hand of help to the victimized may be interpreted by those who admire her as a transformation of chivalry.)

The 18th century saw glorification of reason and intellect, but towards the end of the century there appeared revival of chivalry and conservatism as against French Revolution which produced in Britain a revulsion against

change and reform.

A gentleman, who at first was regarded as a ruling class man with right of ownership of property, had to be chivalrous by the end of the 19th century. Gentlemen now had to be, just like the medieval knight, brave; be courteous and protective to women, children, and the needy; keep promise; show no sign of panic or cowardice; play fair; behave above calculation and meanness and be loyal to their comrades and meet death without flinching.

The 19th century gentlemen and young men were spurred on to romantic gestures and chivalric dashing deeds in both love and war by such literary works as *Ivanhoe* (1820) by Sir Walter Scott, *The Broad Stone of Honour* (1822) by Kenelm Henry Digby, *On Heroes and Hero-worship* (1841) by Thomas Carlyle (who incidentally led the counter-attack on Utilitarianism and laissez-faire), *Idylls of the King* (1859-85) by Lord Tennyson, and many others in the same genre.

Arthurian Paintings (frescoes) by William Dyce (1806-64) and chivalric pictures by G.F. Watts (1817-1904), Sir Joseph Noel Paton (1821-1902), and Sir John Everett Millais (1829-96), etc, must also have helped to spur chivalry.

In the second half of the 19th century, chivalry was much in the air in the public schools of those days and organized games were encouraged by 'muscular Christianity' advocated by Digby, Carlyle, Thomas Hughes (1822-96, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*), Charles Kingsley (1819-75, author of *Ode to the North East Wind*), etc., as a means of improving the character. [Interestingly enough, Rugby School headmaster Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) seems to have had little interest in organised games, and shown active hostility to the idea of chivalry, because chivalry seemed to set up the personal allegiance to the chief above allegiance to God and law.]

At the beginning of the 20th century the concept of chivalry flowered in the shape of the *Boy Scouts* initiated in 1907 by Sir Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941) who studied similar activities in Sparta, Japan, America (the Knights of King Arthur — an organization for boys), etc. [Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts Rule 8 goes: 'Rather die honest than live shamelessly.']

After the World War I, however, there have been drastic changes. The very concepts of glory and honour (derived from chivalry) which made excessive

patriotism and war acceptable, and even desirable (and to some extent helped produce imperialism in the late 19th century), seem to have dissolved in the modern and permissive democratic society of Britain, though we still see some legacy of chivalry in occasional national crises such as the Falklands War and the education of children who are even now taught never to hit a man when he is down, to support the weaker, and be 'good losers'. Tony Blair's repeated pressure on John Major during the Tory's negative campaigns before the general election last year to "fight an honest campaign" is still fresh in our mind.

Insularity and xenophobia

Britain has produced a number of men of valour with an adventurous seafaring spirit such as Sir Francis Drake (c.1540-96), the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world and commander at defeat of Spanish Armada, Captain Cook (1728-79), an explorer of the Pacific and Antarctic, Admiral Nelson (1758-1805), the naval commander who defeated the combined French-Spanish fleet off Cape Trafalgar in 1805, and Captain Scott (1868-1912), a naval officer and Antarctic explorer.

English history is also a lengthy process of immigration and integration, with a counterpoint of emigration. In addition to the well-known bigger scale 'invaders' such as Anglo-Saxons and Normans, we can list up, to just mention a few, such important immigrants: the *Jews* who established communities in the 12th century and played an increasing role as money lenders, the *Flemings* in the 14th century who established themselves as weavers, painters, masons, sculptors, etc., and the *Huguenots* from the 16th century on who were active in glassware, textiles, paper-making, and banking business.

Being an island country, however, Britain has been destined, at least to some extent, to be insular, and the British have continued to be a quite insular and home-loving nation. As a natural consequence of geographical separation from the Continent, xenophobia was also born. They tend to ask for what they call hard fact or known facts and keep distance from the outside world and never come to terms quickly with new things or untried ideas which are regarded as undesirable.

Their xenophobia, created partially by their geographical seclusion and the repeated invasions and probably puffed up with their pride on their national power, may have also had some effect on their arrogant perspectives: Britain's 'civilising mission', 'economic and cultural onslaught', and 'cultural imperialism over the 'inferior' Asian and African nations, i.e., the idea that British laws and institutions were self-evidently superior to those of Asia and Africa.

One good example of their xenophobia is their indifference to, or more often distrust, hatred and fear of foreign togues, cuisines, etc. The British do not seem to be so easily roused about what goes on beyond their own shores, either. During the British Disease days, internal issues did not seem to be of great concern to most British people (though the media such as BBC and quality papers have spent a lot of time and energy on the coverage of global issues, and now, in accordance with the recovery of their economy, they seem to be more concerned with them). This tendency was and is still, to some extent, seen among the British (especially among the working class people) who have been reputed for their empiricism or belief in the guiding star of experience and their heavier dependence upon instinct and intuition than other Europeans.

Another example of their distrust (of anything new this time) is their negative predictions about new programmes or projects. 'Coronation Street' was predicted never to run, Concord never to fly, the Euro-Tunnel never to be built, and, now, the Millenium Dome at Greenwich never to be full. The press are also notoriously diabolical judges of success.

The geographical seclusion and limitation imposed upon them, however, produced advantages as well. A sense of nationality and patriotism was naturally born and strengthened, ironically, by the repeated loss of land on the Continent (by John the Lackland, Henry VI, etc.), the defeat in the Hundred Years' War, etc. The British have a great opinion of themselves. The British people's well-known instinct for freedom, which we may read as a determined opposition to tyranny, is thus the reflection, at least in part, of their insularity.

This insularity, however, seems to be gradually disappearing because of

the emergence of one vast global village created by the development in traffic system (such as the international aeroplanes and the Eurotunnel which connects London and Paris in three hours), the world-wide internet computer network, etc. We may also add here that the traditionally poor English food is greatly improved both in quality and variety thanks to the epicurian travellers both out of home and from overseas. In the near future, therefore, the British people's traditional insularity and xenophobia may be replaced by multiculturalism now seen increasingly as a strength of the new Britain.

Law-abidingness and honesty

We are given the impression that the British people have been renowned for their longing for justice and lawfulness especially after the establishment of the Common Law in the reign of Henry II (1154-89) and John the Lackland's signing of Magna Carta in 1215.

The following anecdote well illustrates their law-abidingness even in the time of emergency. During the Blitz in London, the citizens prevented by the authorities from using the Tube stations as shelters, bought themselves penny-halfpenny tickets. They thus obtained legal status as passengers in the Tube while the authorities had no reason to turn them out again.

We should, however, remember that this lawfulness as we know it has more or less been brought about only after 1829 when the meritorious enforcer of law, the British police, was created by Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850).

The British, just as other nations, have had among them a number of poachers (of royal games, etc.), smugglers (of tea, wine, drugs, etc.), adulterators (of ale, beer, tea, etc.), to say nothing of ordinary pickpockets, thieves, swindlers, blackmailers, homicides, etc. The coarseness of old British manners which enjoyed public executions, prizefights and such blood-sports as cock-fighting and bear-baiting was notorious until as late as the last century. Drunkenness of the working class and the moral decadance of the middle/high classes in the 18th century are dexterously depicted in the satirical paintings and engravings such as 'Marriage à la Mode' (1745) and 'Gin Lane' (1751) by William Hogarth (1697-1764) and the 'criminal' and sinister scenes in London by Charles Dickens (1812-70).

These days there are an increasing number of crimes committed by minors and young adults such as burglary and drug trafficking. According to *Social Trends 27*, notifiable offences (theft and handling stolen goods, burglary, criminal damage, robbery, etc.) have increased steadily since the early 1950s and there are increasing numbers of sexual abuses of children, rapes, etc. Deplorably the English soccer hooligans are highly notorious throughout the world. And although they are highly queue-loving people, they seem to have no sense of rule-breaking or remorse when they, as pedestrians, ignore traffic signals. Even the beloved honest 'Peelers' (brought into the world by Sir Robert Peel not to molest but to protect property and its owners) are losing their confidence due to repeated misdemeanours in the early 1990s of some of them in such cases as 'the Guildford Four' and 'the Birmingham Six' (in which people were wrongly convicted of terrorist bombings); bribery cases; and the obviously racially-handled Stephen Lawrence inquiry, which is leading up to the rethink of the way it handles racial issues. [Two black Superintendents are now in command of key London areas (Hornsey & Battersea) and a greater number of officers from ethnic minorities are being recruited.]

The friendly British 'bobby' who used to have his own 'beat' is now sometimes called the 'fuzz' or the 'cop' or the 'pigs'.

Having said so, however, the British still value the virtues of decent living and honesty, and regard 'jumping a queue' as the most heinous and unforgivable of all the crimes. The love of liberty runs through the veins of the British, for whom honesty of intent is still the best policy.

Sense of compromise/balance

The inter-racial experiences such as intermarrying and intermixture of culture caused by the repeated invasions in the small island country of Britain seem to have helped to make Britain a blended country of compromise and its people many-sided and versatile.

We may also argue that the British (especially the English) people are influenced by the moderate and misty climate which enchants every horizon in Britain not with thunderbolts or raging storms but with a mild compromise of colours: the blues, greys and silver whites. The domesticated landscapes

frequently depicted by such representative British landscapists as Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), John Constable (1776-1837), and JMW Turner (1775-1851), do show the natural compromise between the variously-hued clouds/skies and the earth.

The British are thus blessed with a gift of adaptability. Repeatedly invaded by peoples from outside, they have had to make a lot of compromises. The Celts mingled with the aborigines such as the Iberians and the Beakers. The Romans conquered but cohabited with the Celts by establishing important inland towns near former British strongholds. The Anglo-Saxons massacred the Celts, but coexisted with the Danes, and the Norman invaders also assimilated with the Anglo-Saxons. This trend was repeated in the building of churches and towns: the Romans utilized the Celtic villages, the Anglo-Saxons built their churches on the sites where they pulled down Romano-British ones, and the Normans where there stood Anglo-Saxon ones.

Even faced with such dramatic social turbulences, the British have always stopped short of the ultimate, and, we may safely say, their artful adaptability and accommodation have avoided bloody revolutions seen, for example, in France and Russia, though there have been sporadically some exceptional cases of extremities such as burning alive some 300 Protestants by Mary I, beheading of Charles I by Cromwellian parliament, killing of more than 3,000 people in the recent Northern Irish disputes, and so forth.

Their compromises are still found, among others, in their politics and religions. Their two-party politics has produced 'Westminster see-saw' (= the change by turns, like the 'swing of the pendulum', of regimes in Britain). Christianity tactfully built itself on the pagan rituals and customs, which is endorsed by the fact that most of the current 'Christian' religious festivals have their origin in Celtic times, or even earlier than that. The Church of England is itself a compromise between the more ritually-minded Roman Catholicism and rather simplistic Protestantism.

The British people these days are neither fervant devotees of any established form of religion nor yet entirely irreligious, but religious education, compulsory under the Education Act 1944, is still required for all pupils as part of the basic curriculum. Parents, however, have a right to

withdraw their children from religious education classes and the content of religious education, though due recognition is given to the place of Christianity, is determined locally, taking account of the faiths of the local population. There thus seem to be always a sense of compromise and 'a margin of imprecision' left in their values and institutions.

The recent recovery of the people's support rate of the Queen and Prince Charles, which suffered a sharp plummeting after the death of Diana, is another sign of their sense of balance. Compromise, give-and-take, live-and-let-live reasonableness are thus still a national habit in Britain.

Humour

Humour is still definitely part of an Englishman's birthright. We cannot describe the British without touching upon their sense of humour.

There is really no end to the list of humour in Britain, and literary tradition of Britain has a long history of humorists since Geoffrey Chaucer (?2340-1400), the author of *The Canterbury Tales*, a kaleidoscopic collection of humour, and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) to numberless followers of them up to date. Characteristically the British often laugh at themselves (satirically depicted as an arrogant, stubborn, snobbish, eccentric or stupid 'John Bull', etc.) and invite other people to join in, and often affectionately, though subtly, bring into relief and perspective the figures that stand in darkness and danger. Their humour seems to be sharpened by their innate sense of distance which gives them an objective observation of things.

The following are some of the humorous exchanges which caught my eyes and ears recently.

In 1991 the Queen (whose 'Royal Talking Hat' appeared in a newspaper giving a speech at the podium in the White House garden adjusted for the then US President George Bush) started her speech in the Congress the following day by saying: "I hope you can see me from where you are." Several years ago in the Commons, Madam Deputy Speaker in reply to an Opposition MP's request that "The Right Honorable Gentleman should face us when he delivers a speech," humorously replied: "I'd also like to see the profiles of gentlemen rather than their balding heads." In 1995, tricked by a Canadian disk jockey

claiming to be Canadian Prime Minister, the Queen spoke on radio for quite some time, but saw the funny side of it only and was not offended at all. In October, 1996, Tony Blair, in satirical retaliation to the Tory's smear campaign poster carrying a photo of demonically red-eyed Blair, started his keynote party conference speech at Blackpool with the following words: "So, you must be careful with these flash lights. It's making my eyes red." Finally last year a speeding motorist in England who was caught by a roadside camera and sent by the police a penalty notice demanding a payment together with a photo of the car, sent a photo of a check with the demanded amount of money, but the police sending back a photo of a pair of handcuffs, gave in and posted a cheque.

I would like to add here that the Labour Party's annual conference this year at Blackpool was also seasoned with humour by John Prescott, etc.

Individualism; self-reliance (self-help); pride on individual skills

Christianity has long taught that every individual is a potential soul of equal value in the eyes of God and the British people are well-known for their firm belief in the 'inviolability' of the fundamental liberties of the individual under English law and the 'sacredness' of the individual. The British do not want their lives and their work to be geared to machines, which we can see, for example, in the riots (1811-17) by the Luddites who opposed the introduction of machinery, a serious threat to their jobs, into their textile industries, and destroyed factory machines. The British craftsmen are reputed for their pride on their individual skills. The British, being individualistic and aristocratic at heart, do not wish to be well led, let alone "dictated". They want to be always 'their own masters.'

Britain is thus a unique country in which we can see a rather conspicuous existence of the individual, the community, and the State, with the primacy of the individual over the community, and that of the community over the State. The sanctity of the individual is counted for more than central authority. The State existed more for the individual, than the individual for the State, though, being patriotic at the same time, the British did set themselves to save the country and the monarch in national crises. This clearly shows that

Britain is a country which sets the highest value on the individuals, followed by the community and by the State, which leads up to the principle of '*laissez faire*', the belief that the best government is the one which governs least and that the individual should have freedom to pursue his or her best interests and be personally responsible for his or her failure. (This doctrine, however, we have to admit, has to take responsibility, at least to some extent, for the appalling state of the new industrial towns during the Industrial Revolution (c.1760-c.1860). *Laissez faire*, however, more or less came to an end in the interests of the poor and oppressed when the Factory Acts were passed between 1804 and the 1840s, the Poor Law Reform in 1834, and the Education Act in 1870, and such social amelioration became the norm, culminating in the creation by the Labour government of the welfare state of 'from the cradle to the grave' in the 1940s and 1950s.

The British are confident, through their long glorious history of liberty and prosperity, that they can keep going with their own individual reason, wits and conscience.

As one is encouraged to be an individual, the instinct for individual liberty becomes far more than for equality, hence self-reliance and self-help essential. The importance attached to the concept of self-reliance or self-help can be seen in many fields in Britain. In this line the grammar schools of the 15th and 16th centuries were founded and endowed by individual benefactors. Voluntary hospitals were developed in the 18th and 19th centuries under the impulse of individual compassion and coordinated voluntary effort. And now, a most important motto of many UK-based international charities such as Oxfam and Save the Children is 'self-help', or standing on one's own feet, among the charity recipients. Britain is indeed rich in such biographies of the great as Samuel Smiles's *Self Help*.

Turning our eyes onto the activities of individuals, self-help activities such as general exercise and keep-fit, gardening, Do-It-Yourself, are firmly established in British culture, though Mrs Thatcher's affection for thrift and self-help — the Victorian values she espouses — does not necessarily seem to have gone down well with the British people.

Voluntary habit

Although the boundaries between private and public spheres seem to be gradually getting obscurer, the British people who 'live and cage themselves in their own castle' in which they can fully enjoy privacy and profound joys of solitude, still have a tendency to do things by themselves, on a voluntary basis, in free association with others, not expecting all things from the State, or remitting all things to the government. As was seen above, this trend in Britain is endorsed, among others, by the popularity of (or their addiction to) hobbies of personal tastes and individual styles such as walking, gardening (without the help of professional gardeners like in Japan), and DIY (especially amateur carpentry). It is also clearly reflected in the tremendous number of charities in Britain.

Charities in Britain have long been supported by the spirit of 'noblesse oblige', the idea that those who have great privileges must bear great burdens, not for reward or honour, but solely out of a sense of duty. This spirit has been traditionally expressed, among others, in JPs (justices of the peace), the local gentry who dispensed the king's peace in the king's name, and in the service of MPs in the House of Commons never regarded as a profession or a means of earning a livelihood, but the acceptance of a responsibility. The relatively low salary of the MPs and the 'gentleman's hours' or the business hours of the Commons which do not start until 14:30 except on Friday are another reflections of the same spirit. Traditionally the MPs were supposed to be doing a public service in addition to their ordinary work which was done in the morning. It is therefore regrettable that there are nowadays some MPs embedded with sleazes, cash-for-questions affairs, etc. [Incidentally we may argue here that the amateurism or anti-professionalism peculiar not only to the MPs but also to the ordinary people in Britain has helped their life from becoming too hugely serious, always leaving space for fun and relief. Although there are now a variety of professional sports 'invented' by the British, the general public in Britain still seem to be enjoying sports as an amateur. What is important is still not to win, but to take part in, enjoy, and 'play the game'.]

Even the ordinary British, however needy their own circumstances may be,

do not seem to be wholly at ease with themselves unless they are spending some of their energies for a worthy cause or purpose outside the field of their immediate self-interest. According to *Britain 1998*, in England and Wales over 181, 800 charities (established for exclusively charitable purposes such as the relief of poverty, the advancement of education or religion, promotion of equal opportunity, and so forth) are registered with the Charity Commission, a non-ministerial government department, their combined income reaching around £18,000 million.⁴

The charitable donations have approximately doubled in cash terms over the last ten years since 1986, the average weekly giving in 1995-6 by all households in the United Kingdom amounting to £1.20.⁵ And about 10% of adults in Great Britain belonged to an environmental organization or charity in 1996.⁶

The aim of charity has seen a change from a mere provision of relief to the offer of aid which enables the recipients to become self-supportive, and 'self-help' groups have been the fastest expanding area in types of voluntary organizations over the last 20 or so years.

The voluntary habits are still there with the British. As Arthur Bryant says, "Without justice and charity there could be no England."⁷

Concluding Remarks

The pinstriped, bowler-hatted businessman with a tightly furled umbrella is gone from Fleet Street. So are the red telephone booths throughout the nation except in some areas where they are "preserved" for nostalgic reasons or as an item to "revitalize" the area.

16 months ago, Tony Blair came into power as Prime Minister, promising a new vision of Britain for the 21st century. The Prime Minister walks in his shirtsleeves. The Lord Chancellor no longer has to walk backward in front of the Queen during the annual opening of Parliament. Bowing and curtsying to members of the Royal Family is now optional. Buckingham Palace is open to the public for two months in the summer. The Queen pays tax. Some things are thus clearly changing.

There are, however, reassuring reminders of their country's long history

and tradition. Barristers still wear the flowing black robes and white horsehair wigs. The Sunday roast and Yorkshire pudding is still there. Thatched cottages and moated castles are well preserved. And the Royal Family are still with them.

The week of hysteria before September 6th in 1997 did look like a defining moment in British history, but now we may safely be able to say that it was not. What seemed to have changed along with the death of Diana was a kind of ephemeral ripples on a lake, deep under which lie real values which resist sudden external forces.

It is too early to be conclusive, but we may say that the British people are managing to preserve their conventional characteristics even in this modern age and despite quite a big shock of their loss of the most beloved one. They have overcome in the past various threats to the established ways of British life such as waves of invasions which brought about 'foreign' ways of living and thinking, the Industrial Revolution which mechanized manufacturing and destroyed traditional rural life, French and Russian Revolutions which threatened the fate of the upper class, and the two World Wars which greatly eased class society. All of these, however, have failed to totally change the British, though they altered them at least to some extent. In this sense we may safely argue that the British and their society have changed by cumulation rather than total upheaval.

As Barker said, "a creature who has travelled so far will not readily abandon his journey, and (that) the experience which he has gained through many centuries will not fail him overnight."⁸ Human beings do not change so quickly, especially the 'conservative' British. This has been endorsed by the recent swing back of popularity of the Queen and Charles, the Prince of Wales, whose popularity has been eclipsed by that of Diana.

The conservative forces still keep their hold on British life, for whatever people do are surely deeply rooted on their past. What they are now has been made by the thinking and the working of many generations of men.

So I am of opinion that the national character of the British is still fundamentally unchanged.

Notes:

- 1 E. Barker (ed.), *The Character of England* (London: Oxford University Press., 1963. (Lit, of 1947) p.47.
- 2 A. Bryant, *The National Character* (Edited, with notes, by Kozo Tada) (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1990) p.92.
- 3 *The Guardian Weekly*, 23/8/'98 p.8.
- 4 *Britain 1998* (London: The Stationery Office, 1988) pp.45-46.
- 5 Church, J. (ed.) *Social Trends 27* (1997 Edition) (London: The Stationery Office., 1997) p.112.
- 6 *ibid.* p.185.
- 7 A. Bryant, *Spirit of England* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1982) p.47.
- 8 Barker, p.52.

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