

## Archbishop of York attacks the ‘patronising’ London elite

By Gabriella Swerling, *The Daily Telegraph*, August 6, 2021 (shortened)

Writing exclusively in *The Telegraph*, below, the Archbishop of York, who is currently the most senior leader in the Church of England, also questioned why it had become taboo to be patriotic.

His comments come in the wake of a visit to Scotland by the Prime Minister aimed at boosting support for the Union, and after last month’s European football championships revived debate around English patriotism. Boris Johnson spent two days in Scotland this week, as part of a drive to increase support for the Union amid fresh calls for a second independence referendum by the SNP<sup>1</sup>.

The Government is keen to stress the strengths of the UK as a whole, rather than the individual nations. Last month, Michael Gove, who is in charge of union policy, said that the system of “English Votes for English Laws”, which means only English MPs vote on matters which only affect England, should be scrapped. Mr Gove, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, said the procedure—which was introduced in 2015 by David Cameron to correct a perceived imbalance in the powers of English and Scottish MPs—had “not served our Parliament well”. The SNP argued that it created a second class of MPs who could not take part in all votes.

Last year, this newspaper revealed that the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, was taking a sabbatical this summer for “spiritual renewal” and would be writing a book. This means that the Archbishop of York, who is usually the second-most senior bishop and leader of the Church of England, is currently the *de facto* head of the institution.

In March, the Most Rev Cottrell published a book entitled *Dear England: Finding Hope, Taking Heart and Changing the World*, inspired by a conversation with a barista who asked him why he became a priest. The book became his extended answer to that question—as well as his letter to a divided country that no longer sees the relevance or value of the Christian narrative—and covers contemporary issues which have divided modern society, ranging from coronavirus and Brexit, to Trident and the Scottish independence referendum.

### **We need an expansive vision for a courageous and compassionate England**

By the Most Rev Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York

When I grew up in the Sixties, I thought of myself as British. I knew I was English, but it was less significant for my identity. I was aware of our difficult history, but rather proud of the pragmatism and vision that had created an experiment in nationhood: different nations living as one. I was British and English. My country was the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: complicated, but it seemed to work.

Various devolutions seemed to be a good development. They emphasised that unity in diversity. They shared responsibility and empowered local government. A Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly were born. But similar developments never really happened in England. Consequently, Westminster started to feel like the English Government. And London, with its own mayor and wealth, size and influence, started to feel like a separate nation: even in England, it was London and the rest.

Brexit delivered further complications and I suspect most people voted on identity, not economics.

Many English people feel left behind by metropolitan elites in London and the South East, and by devolved governments and strengthened regional identities in Scotland and Wales. Their heartfelt cry to be heard is often disregarded, wilfully misunderstood or patronised as backwardly xenophobic.

But what if this is about the loss of identity? No longer British, temperamentally never really European, and definitely outside the wealth and opportunities of London, English people want to know what has happened to their country. These questions of identity and purpose have never really been addressed.

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1 The SNP: the Scottish National Party

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What we need is an expansive vision of what it means to be English as part of the UK. This will help us rediscover a national unity more fractured than I have ever known it in my lifetime.

50 A first foundation would be a more developed and strengthened regional government within England. Westminster would hold on to those big issues to do with our shared sovereignty, while empowering the separate nations and regions to serve their own localities better.

I say this as a bishop of the Church of England, an inheritor of a post that dates back to 627 AD. For a long time, the church inhabited a world that was a tapestry of kingdoms and not yet nation states. That memory of regional identity is still very strong here in the North, and only just below the surface elsewhere.

55 Without strengthening regional identity, we will carry on defining ourselves against things—Europe, London, Westminster—leading to a negative political discourse and a hopeless future. When our English and regional identities are strengthened, we take a proper pride and responsibility in our own self-determination, as part of something larger than ourselves.

60 Let’s play to our strengths: our shared history within these islands; our strong regional identities going back centuries. Let’s also look to the other things that bind us together as English and British, modernising and strengthening them rather than neglecting them or imagining they are the problem.

What are they? Historically, they are the very particular but surprisingly enduring threads of our history, such as monarchy and church; and from the more recent past the NHS and even the BBC World Service.

65 What binds these things together, although so different, is a belief in public service and a desire to serve the common good.

They arise out of that Christian vision itself, which is the bedrock of our cultural, ethical and political life. As Jesus taught, it really is about loving your neighbour as yourself. The Church of England is one of the only institutions left in our nation with a local branch in virtually every  
70 community, and despite unhelpful reports to the contrary, remains committed to this local and national vision: a church for England.

As we’ve seen during the pandemic, and as it has been for centuries, the parish is the beating heart of community life in England. Long may it remain so. Not just church bells and Evensong, but foodbanks, debt relief, youth work, shelters for the homeless and all the other ways the local church  
75 works with others to make a difference.

Without a big vision of one United Kingdom and the tight focus of regional identity and governance, we will shrink into an amalgamation of communities always in danger of falling apart and only serving the individual good. Together, paying close attention to the inter-relationship of local and national need, our vision is enlarged, we see how our wellbeing is tied up with our  
80 neighbours.

Seeking the common good in a nation that is a community of communities would become the driving and unifying purpose of our common life. Since the greatest challenge facing our world is climate change, such a bigger vision of human community and mutual responsibility might be our only way forward.

85 And why shouldn’t courageous and compassionate English people lead the way? In fact, these two words seem to me to be the best ones to define the Englishness I long for: the courageous, entrepreneurial spirit of a trading, island nation; and the compassion of a nation slowly facing up to some of the failings of its colonial past; a pioneer of common suffrage and healthcare for all; the birthplace of the World Service. It is time to be proud to be English.