

Cornwall and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Simon Thompson

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SIMON THOMPSON, OCT 26 2014

I'm very interested in what's called the politics of recognition. This phrase is used to describe a wide range of political phenomena in which individuals and groups of various kinds struggle to be recognized for their particular characteristics or identities or achievements.

Some groups want to be recognized for being the same as others. So, for example, the American civil rights movement can be understood as a struggle by black Americans to be treated in the same way as all other American citizens. But other groups want recognition of their distinctiveness – of the fact that they are not like others.

The recent announcement that Cornish people are to be granted minority status within the UK looks like a case of this kind. The announcement was made by the Council of Europe, a body which describes itself as 'the continent's leading human rights organisation'. Founded in 1949, its principal objective is to oversee the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights, which the Council describes as 'a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law'.

Of particular importance to the present case is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, drawn up in 1995 (<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/html/157.htm>). Article 5.1 of this Convention declares that 'The Parties undertake to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage'.

In the UK, the decision that Cornwall would be treated as a national minority under the Convention was warmly welcomed by many. According to a report on the BBC's website, Dick Cole, leader of Mebyon Kernow said: 'This is a fantastic development. This is a proud day for Cornwall.' And Chief Secretary to the Treasury Danny Alexander said: 'Cornish people have a proud history and a distinct identity. I am delighted that we have been able to officially recognise this and afford the Cornish people the same status as other minorities in the UK'.

But this announcement was not greeted with universal acclaim. It's interesting to read the numerous comments which followed the BBC's report on its website. Some welcomed the announcement: 'I am proud to call myself Cornish. This is a great day for all Cornish men and women. Kernow bys vyken [Cornwall for Ever!].'

Others were rather more sceptical. A good number were concerned about the effect on the unity of the UK as a whole: 'I'm Cornish with Cornish roots and family but I can't see how this will benefit the county. Seems like a huge waste of time and money to me ... it's a shame there are people desperate to segregate themselves rather than join together as a nation, all identities combined.' And another, in a similar vein, wrote: 'This is obviously good for Cornwall but I do worry where the endless picking away at the Sovereignty of our Nation will end.'

Much more critically, some implicitly invoked a slippery slope argument: 'I am an original Essex boy and I want minority status too. The world has gone totally mad !!!' It might be argued that others' comments verged on the paranoid: 'It's in the EU's interest to fragment the constituent nation states in order to maintain it [sic] hegemony. This is part of the plan.'

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All of this prompts some very tricky questions. Is it possible to recognize a national minority or a minority people without undermining the unity of the broader political community? Or does the recognition of a national minority set in train in process in which the breakup of that larger community becomes inevitable? Recently, of course, all eyes have been on Scotland. But the recognition of the Cornish as a minority people may also have very significant consequences in the long run.

About the author:

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