

Don't mention the civil war - the English are still fighting it

**Martin
Kettle**



It is commonplace for writers on American politics to observe that, more than 150 years on, the United States is in various ways still fighting its civil war between the slavery-supporting south and the more liberal and urban industrial north. It is far less common for writers on British politics to make an equivalent observation about the enduring tenacity of the much older divides of England's 17th-century civil conflict. Yet England's civil war is still with us.

The 1640s battles between authority and liberty may not have produced another civil war. But iterations of the divide have resonated down the centuries - from the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9, through the Whig-Tory rivalry of the 18th century, the advance of liberalism and reform in the 19th century, and of labourism and equalities in the 20th. It is not hard to see, in the contrast between a privileged and dissipated political figure such as Boris Johnson and a puritanical one such as Jeremy Corbyn, that there are 17th-century echoes in our own binary times too.

Most of those who enter the Royal Academy galleries over the next three months for its new exhibition, Charles I: King and Collector, will be given no inkling of this. They will come to look at stunning pictures by Van Dyck, Holbein, Titian and Mantegna among many others. Civil war, however, is conspicuous by its almost total absence from the new show. Only the fact that we arrive with some knowledge of Charles I's notoriety and eventual execution ensures that this absence of politics is itself a huge and silent presence.

To an extent, this depoliticisation of Charles I might seem to contradict the claim that England is still refighting the civil war. A popular modern monarchy and the end of the death penalty have combined to leave Charles as the posthumous moral victor of the conflict he lost for good reason in real life. Flowers will be placed on his memorial in Trafalgar Square on the anniversary of his execution next week as usual. There will be none on Oliver Cromwell's - and not just because his final burial place is not known. The generations of liberal English people who revered Cromwell are thin on the ground these days. Cromwell's Protestant fundamentalism, his treatment of Ireland - and of course the regicide of 1649 - make him an anathema.

Yet the resonances of these 17th-century conflicts - which had deep roots in Scotland, Ireland and Wales as well as England - are still there, and not far below the surface. Republicanism is indisputably a niche belief these days, but this country's blundering quest for republican-style common values is unsolved. Modern progressives may no longer have busts of Cromwell on their desks (confession time: I still do), but the Levellers and Gerrard Winstanley continue to be inspirational.

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And for all the modern revisionism about Charles I - the latest example is Leanda de Lisle's *White King* - lots of people will nevertheless enter the RA exhibition with a distaste for its central figure.

The lingering influence of the civil war within modern English life is part of something much wider in England's culture. Unusually among modern nations, both England and the Britain that England dominates lack a shared national historical narrative; this makes England distinct from the somewhat more secure national narratives of Scotland, Wales and even Ireland. Few countries are more historically minded in some respects than England. Yet English history - what it was, what is important in it, how it shapes us, and how it is taught - remains a political battleground.

Few people really believe that it is simply a story of kings and queens, battles and triumphs and defeats. Yet this approach still dominates the way the subject is taught and thought about. The reality is, of course, far more complex. British history is not just English: it is

Scottish, Welsh and Irish too. Much of it is bound up with the European continent, with France in particular. It is also a history of poor people, the ordinary, the angry and the rebellious, not just of monarchs and prime ministers. It is the history of women as well as men, of children as well as adults, of migrants and ethnicities and minorities as well as those who ruled, wrote or invented.

All these different histories matter. None of them are necessarily more virtuous or worthwhile than the others - though some are certainly more influential. History is not simple: it is complicated, often fiendishly and irrecoverably so. The rules and mentalities of these many pasts were different, and we must always beware judging them by today's equally impermanent standards. Women's lives, the Scottish experience, black Britons or the history of protest and industrial conflict, should be part of a fully rounded 21st-century historical awareness. But so should kings and queens.

England and Britain need a new shared vision of their history. It needs to be inclusive, to deal with the bad and the good. But the constant battle to insist that X is more important than Y, that the imperial era is more important than that of the Normans, or the view that history must be full of moral lectures, is ultimately political not historical. The two things are not the same.

A modern liberal, multicultural, part-federalised country such as Britain, one that claims to be open to the world, should above all other things be open in its historical mind. Britain fails to be. Endless movies about Churchill, the second world war and the scrabbling search for lost British greatness are no substitute, and they actively stand in the way of answering the questions that matter now more than ever. Where do we come from? What do we want to be? What can help to bind us together?