

Robin Cook's chicken tikka masala speech

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Extracts from a speech by the foreign secretary to the Social Market Foundation in London



Tonight I want to celebrate Britishness. As Foreign Secretary I see every day the importance of our relations with foreign countries to the strength of our economy, to the security of our nation, to the safety of our people against organised crime, even to the health of our environment. A globalised world demands more foreign contacts than even Britain has experienced in the past. I also know that we are likely to make our way more successfully in the world if we are secure in our British identity, and confident about its future. That security and confidence is important for the inner strength it gives us in our conduct of business with others. I want to argue the case why we can be confident about the strength and the future of British identity.

Sadly, it has become fashionable for some to argue that British identity is under siege, perhaps even in a state of terminal decline. The threat is said to come in three forms.

First, the arrival of immigrants who, allegedly, do not share our cultural values and who fail to support the England cricket team. Few dare to state this case explicitly, but it is the unmistakable subliminal message.

Second, our continued membership of the European Union¹, which is said to be absorbing member states into a country called Europe.

Third, the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is seen as a step to the break-up of the UK.

This evening, I want to set out the reasons for being optimistic about the future of Britain and Britishness. Indeed, I want to go further and argue that in each of the areas where the pessimists identify a threat, we should instead see developments that will strengthen and renew British identity.

Multicultural Britain

The first element in the debate about the future of Britishness is the changing ethnic composition of the British people themselves. The British are not a race, but a gathering of countless different races and communities, the vast majority of which were not indigenous to these islands.

(...)f

¹ This speech is from 2001, long before the UK left the European Union (Brexit) in 2020

The idea that Britain was a pure Anglo-Saxon society before the arrival of communities from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa is fantasy. But if this view of British identity is false to our past, it is false to our future too. The global era has produced population movements of a breadth and richness without parallel in history.

Today's London is a perfect hub of the globe. It is home to over 30 ethnic communities of at least 10,000 residents each. In this city tonight, over 300 languages will be spoken by families over their evening meal at home.

This pluralism is not a burden we must reluctantly accept. It is an immense asset that contributes to the cultural and economic vitality of our nation.

Legitimate immigration is the necessary and unavoidable result of economic success, which generates a demand for labour faster than can be met by the birth-rate of a modern developed country. Every country needs firm but fair immigration laws. There is no more evil business than trafficking in human beings and nothing corrodes social cohesion worse than a furtive underground of illegal migrants beyond legal protection against exploitation. But we must also create an open and inclusive society that welcomes incomers for their contribution to our growth and prosperity. Our measures to attract specialists in information technology is a good example.

Our cultural diversity is one of the reasons why Britain continues to be the preferred location for multinational companies setting up in Europe. The national airline of a major European country has recently relocated its booking operation to London precisely because of the linguistic variety of the staff whom it can recruit here.

And it isn't just our economy that has been enriched by the arrival of new communities. Our lifestyles and cultural horizons have also been broadened in the process. This point is perhaps more readily understood by young Britons, who are more open to new influences and more likely to have been educated in a multi-ethnic environment. But it reaches into every aspect of our national life.

Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.

Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness.

The modern notion of national identity cannot be based on race and ethnicity, but must be based on shared ideals and aspirations. Some of the most successful countries in the modern world, such as the United States and Canada, are immigrant societies. Their experience

shows how cultural diversity, allied to a shared concept of equal citizenship, can be a source of enormous strength. We should draw inspiration from their experience.

(...)

Britishness and devolution

(...)

Let us put to bed the scare stories about devolution leading to the “Death of Britain”. Devolution has been a success for Scotland and for Wales, but it has also been a success for Britain. The votes for devolution in the referendums were not votes for separation. They were votes to remain in the United Kingdom with a new constitutional settlement. By recognising the United Kingdom’s diversity, devolution has guaranteed its future. It is striking that today opinion polls in Scotland show that support for separation from the rest of Britain is lower than at the time of the referendum four years ago.

Centuries of living together and working together have created enduring bonds between each of the constituent nations that make up Britain. Our future together in a single state is all the more secure if we each respect the distinctive identity that makes some of us Scottish and others Welsh or English. That mutual respect strengthens our common identity as British.

(...)

Conclusion

(...)

It is natural for every nation to be proud of its identity. We should be proud to be British. But we should be proud of the real Britain of the modern age.

Proud that the strength of the British character reflects the influences of the many different communities who have made their home here over the centuries. Proud that openness, mutual respect and generosity of spirit are essential British values.

We should be proud that those British values have made Britain a successful multi-ethnic society. We should welcome that pluralism as a unique asset for Britain in a modern world where our prosperity, our security and our influence depend on the health of our relations with other peoples around the globe.

Tolerance is important, but it is not enough. We should celebrate the enormous contribution of the many communities in Britain to strengthening our economy, to supporting our public services, and to enriching our culture and cuisine. And we should recognise that its diversity is part of the reason why Britain is a great place to live.

1. What is Cook trying to achieve in this speech?
2. How does Cook structure his argument against the idea that British identity is “under siege”? Identify how he introduces the perceived threats and then reframes them.
3. Cook uses examples to support his claims. Which examples do you find most convincing, and why?
4. How does Cook redefine “Britishness”? Which parts of the speech best reveal his central argument about what British identity should mean?
5. **Rhetorical Devices:**
Cook uses *chicken tikka masala* as a metaphor. What is the effect of this metaphor on the audience? Why might it be especially persuasive or memorable?
6. Find examples of Cook using the rhetorical devices, anaphora and antithesis.

Anaphora: when one or more words are repeated in the beginning of several succeeding sentences. It is one of the oldest literary devices dating all the way back to the biblical psalms. Here is an example from Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

*"This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings [. . .]
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,"*

Antithesis: means putting two opposites together to show the contrast between them clearly: "Setting foot on the moon may be a small step for a man but a giant step for mankind."

Inclusive language: by using the pronouns "we", "us" and "my fellow (Americans)", you include the listeners and make them feel as if they are a part of what you are talking about. We call this technique "inclusive language."

What is the effect of using these rhetorical devices?

7. **Tone and Language Choices:**
Identify two moments where Cook's tone shifts (for example, from celebratory to critical or persuasive). How do these shifts strengthen his message?
8. **How does** Cook address the major “threats” to British identity. How effectively does he counter these arguments?
9. Do you think the message still feels relevant today? Why or why not?