Pre-publication version; forthcoming in European Social Policy and the Covid-19 Pandemic *(Seeleib-Kaiser, M, and Boerner, S. (Eds.)), Oxford University Press*

The UK in search of a new 'imagined community'? Social Cohesion, Boundary building and Social Policy in crisis periods

Matthew Donoghue, University College Dublin

Introduction

> The welfare state originated as a project of nation states, with roots in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Advances in social policy were often related to processes of nation-building, like the introduction of social insurance by Bismarck (1883-89) that followed German unification (1871). Critical periods in a country's history that went along with a renewal of the national spirit also propelled social reform, like the New Deal during the Great Depression in the 1930s and the creation of the British "welfare state" in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War (Leisering, 2003: 175).

The United Kingdom is facing a critical period in its history, in which its territorial integrity and nationhood is under significant pressure. Since the financial crisis of 2008, it can be argued, the country has been engaged in a prolonged period of crisis response. Firstly, dealing with the financial crisis and its fallout. Secondly, instigating a debate on, and subsequently withdrawing, European Union membership thus creating a range of economic, social and political crises that vary in size and scope. Thirdly, managing the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated significant social and economic problems laid bare by the pandemic.

Addressing these crises is dependent on developing and implementing appropriate social and public policies, that not only deal with the immediate crisis (be it Brexit or Covid in the current period) but crucially any knock-on effects. This is made more difficult by the evident fractures in society driven, as Scambler (2020) argues, by the inequalities and power imbalances inherent in contemporary financial capitalism. Ironically, events such as Brexit can be argued to have been driven by such fracturing, and now necessitate – or legitimize – a shift in focus away from addressing these long-term divisions to focus instead on shorter-term political problems. The UK, entering a new historical era, must work to address – or suppress – these divisions.

This chapter considers how the framing of the UK's social policy response to the Covid pandemic has been used to rejuvenate the British 'imagined community', contextualized by the UK's new position as an 'independent' nation state outside of the EU. It argues that the Covid pandemic presents the government with an opportunity to renew and bolster a sense of nation, not only in terms of the UK re-asserting its position in the international order but also in terms of re-asserting what it means to be a British citizen in the post-Brexit era, and in a 'union state' in which multiple nations within the state have varying levels of autonomy and integration is 'less than perfect' (Mitchell, 1996: 608). It also considers how elements of public health, labour and economic policy, developed in the context of both Brexit and Covid, are framed, legitimised and facilitated by the rejuvenation of the imagined community. It draws upon in-depth qualitative analysis of policy literature and speeches focused on (public) health policy and social security policy during the pandemic, analysed through a theoretical framework that highlights the role of social cohesion and, to a lesser extent, nation building strategies, to understand how the UK's policy response to Covid contributes to social cohesion within and across the nations of the UK.

There are many ways a government can bring people together and strengthen a nation. However, social policy responses provide an ideal prism through which to consider social cohesion and nation in the context of crisis for multiple reasons. Firstly, social policy and the welfare state in general are underpinned by practices of solidarity. Generally, these are structured and upheld by norms of citizenship and membership of a polity. All welfare states, regardless of those with a strong or weak sense of social citizenship must, at some level, have public buy-in, and even in Liberal states such as the UK this includes a sense of duty to the less fortunate. Secondly, there is a well-established literature that demonstrates the role of social policy and welfare politics in developing and maintaining territorial solidarity and cohesion (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982; McEwen and Moreno, 2005; Ferrera, 2005), as well as growing literature on the role of social policy as a nation building tool, especially for subnational units (e.g. Béland and Lecours, 2008).

The chapter begins by considering the context of the imagined community, alongside the idea of 'imagined solidarities', that fuses welfare politics with Anderson's landmark work. This outlines the importance of understanding the relationship between the pandemic response, social policy and the rhetoric of cohesion and the nation. Next, the methodological approach taken in the chapter is outlined. The following sections provide the empirical evidence and analysis of the UK's pandemic response and the role of social policy in promoting a specific form of social cohesion focused on territorial integrity and promoting the UK over the constituent nations. Finally, the chapter concludes.

Imagined Communities and Imagined Solidarities

The boundaries of the British state and nation are being challenged by Scottish agitations for independence, growing instability in Northern Ireland, the 'north-south divide' within England and spatial inequality in general, exacerbated significantly by the Brexit process and by the Covid pandemic. In a multinational state such as the UK, the idea of the 'imagined community' is particularly stark; 'Britishness' is contingent and unstable as a cultural and political identifier, the connotations of which have become increasingly more polarised over recent years. Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities asserts that nations, by necessity, must be social constructions; 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or hear of them yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991: 6). Central to this is the construction of a 'we' – a shared identity united by membership and articulated by the products of that membership. This 'we' has become significantly fragmented due to deep inequalities and events such as Brexit, becoming further entrenched by the Covid pandemic and the UK state's response to it.

Yet somewhat ironically the state's response to the pandemic, via its social policy response and the communication of this response, provides an opportunity (however slim) for the UK to *re*-imagine the community. Alongside generating and entrenching division, crises can galvanise populations especially when crises represent an existential threat to a way of life. Covid is exemplary of this and, either through a sense of fear or a sense of solidarity, encourages people and communities to come together. This is something that has clearly been identified and utilized by the UK government not only in its messaging throughout the pandemic, but also in its social policy responses.

There are important differences in terms of policy possibilities with the Covid crisis and the crises associated with Brexit and the Great Recession. The most prominent of these is that the nature of the Covid crisis means that the usual constructed rules and norms on acceptable state spending and state intervention embedded during the latest phase of neoliberalism post-2010 do not hold, even if this turns out to be temporary. Vast public spending projects are not questioned whilst emergency state intervention in multiple facets of public and private life is readily accepted in the name of the greater

good. Yet hanging over this is a tacit commitment to return to pre-pandemic fiscal politics. As stated in Budget 2021, 'it will be necessary to take steps to get the public finances back on track once the economic recovery is durably underway' (HM Treasury, 2021a: 3). This does not diminish the power of crisis as a path-breaking moment. It is open to discussion what 'back on track' signifies; a new economic orthodoxy with more balance between borrowing, spending and saving, or a return to austerity. In a crisis, opposing positions and outcomes can be entertained simultaneously because of the lack of convention around necessary action.

Daniel Wincott (2020) develops Anderson's work on imagined communities to consider the concept of imagined solidarities in the UK. Focusing on the privileged position of the National Health Service (NHS), he argues that it is 'a shared national symbol: by 2012 it was firmly established as the vessel, *par excellence,* of imagined community in and across the UK. As a symbol and an imagined embodiment of values, the NHS became available to a diverse range of political projects' (Wincott, 2020: 8-9). Wincott *et al.* (2021: 2) argue that Brexit was influenced by a 'distinctly English version of the UK', 'rooted in an *Anglo-British imaginary*'. Brexit has also thrown into serious question the future territorial integrity of the UK:

> After Brexit, across Great Britain and Northern Ireland the ambiguities, structures and practices of the territorial constitution have become the stuff of intense contestation and conflict. Its future remains unsettled: the UK might break up, recentralise or be reconstructed as a devolved or multilevel state. It is, though, hard to see how it could retain its current form (Wincott, *et al.* 2021: 2).

It is this context in which the UK government (and indeed the devolved governments) develops its political and policy response to Covid. Crises present challenges and opportunities, especially to political actors. Policymaking itself has increasingly been characterised by 'crisis' (Peck and Theodore, 2015: 14-26). While it is certainly true that the government has had to respond quickly to the Covid crisis, with often unreliable information (either due to insufficient or volatile data), its social and economic response has also been characterised by preceding crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession and the harsh austerity measures that followed, and now the multifaceted crises generated by the (post-) Brexit process: economic, social, political and constitutional in nature.

Some crises quickly lock-in actions, such as the lock-in effects of the financial crisis on austerity economic and social policy. Yet these lock-in effects do not appear out of nowhere; the ostensible choices on offer to policymakers are restricted by previous actions and context. Austerity measures in those European countries that faced sovereign debt crises was mandated, and support was made conditional on implementing such measures. States in the global south have in many cases only been able to avail of economic support and investment after economic restructuring and trade liberalisation (REFS). In the UK's case, austerity was one potential response to the economic shock felt in the City of London from a range of responses. Yet the government chose to shift much economic burden on to ordinary citizens in order to stabilse financial markets (e.g. Glynos *et al.,* 2012; Stanley, 2014; Ferragina and Zola, 2021). The decision to pursue austerity has profoundly affected the UK especially in the context of the Covid pandemic, including social policy (Lupton *et al.,* 2016; Farnsworth and Irving, 2015) and inequality, especially health (Bambra *et al.,* 2020; Keys *et al.,* 2021) and regional (Tubadji *et al.,* 2020; Bhattacharjee *et al.,* 2020) inequalities.

The response of 'personalising' the financial crisis was successful was because it could be framed as an endogenous crisis; one of our own making (Stanley, 2014; Glynos *et al.,* 2012). By contrast, the

Covid pandemic is quintessentially *exogeneous* from a policy and health response perspective[1]. This creates many opportunities, as it is the type of crisis during which rules and convention can be put on hold. The exemplar of this is the speed at which states worldwide abandoned principles of 'cost containment' and surplus operation to fund 'emergency' rescue packages for businesses and individuals (Ferragina and Zola, 2021). Notwithstanding many finance ministers' indications that once the pandemic is over there will be a return to a more or less austere economic and social policy regime, it is still notable that the nature of the crisis enabled governments to ignore their own (largely socially constructed) rules around economic and social governance.

The implication is that the UK government has an opportunity to use the Covid pandemic and the state's response to it to build cohesion around a renewed or reinvigorated (yet still *imagined*) sense of Britishness. A central question however is does this imagined community remain 'Anglo-British', or does it work to incorporate the other nations of the UK in a bid to stabilise and reinforce the territorial integrity of the UK? The Brexit process was as much about presenting a new Britain/UK to the population as it was the technical act of leaving the EU. Given the clear divide on EU membership in the UK, especially from the nations (England and Wales voted to leave, while Northern Ireland and Scotland and voted to remain), it was in the UK government's interest to emphasise crisis management. Wincott *et al.* (2021: 12) demonstrate that during the negotiations, the government downplayed the level of autonomy the devolved nations received thanks to the EU, instead emphasising the binding effect of EU law, restricting autonomy for all nations in the UK. Furthermore, the complexities of devolution make the repatriation of powers to the UK difficult. There is a question about whether powers would need to be centralised first, then devolved, which increases the power of Westminster. At the same time, emphasising the binding nature of EU law provides an opportunity for Westminster to argue that Brexit is ultimately in the interests of all nations in the UK.

The UK, despite its arguably 'core' position in the EU, has tended to be peripheral to Europe not just geographically but politically. Once a 'great power', the UK has retained a commitment to unilaterialism or at least a 'first amongst equals' approach to politics and policy, as this chapter will demonstrate. This British exceptionalism has had a significant influence on policymaking, in which domestic policymaking is either perceived as insulated from international pressures, or is developed with a sense that what is good for the UK will also benefit its neighbours. This is not necessarily vastly different to some of the larger European nations, except its biggest comparators remain in the EU and have indeed been politically committed to the European project since its beginnings. This has an effect on the construction of discourse in these countries and the implications for domestic as well as international policymaking. Seeing itself as a voluntary outsider, the UK has not felt encumbered by other nations. This is another reason that the UK's policymaking in crisis periods is such an important case study, and demonstrates the importance of understanding how the response to crises is framed and promoted in terms of the general population and the nations of the UK – especially Scotland, given its current position in the union.

Methodology

[1] I remark that it is exogenous from a policy and health perspective, and not necessarily exogeneous in itself, because of the impact that developments such as climate change and the birth of the Anthropocene have on the ability of pandemics to spread (Hulme *et al.,* 2020).

Data was collected from public announcements – the regular televised government Covid briefings[2], statements in the House of Commons, press releases and newspaper articles – from the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the then Secretary of Health Matt Hancock, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak. Data was also collected from key policy documents from the Department of Health and the Treasury. These actors and departments were chosen because of their centrality to the state's response to the pandemic. Johnson, Hancock and Sunak have been the primary public face of the *political and policy* response to the pandemic[3]. It has been their job to communicate policy decisions and to 'sell' them to the public. In some cases this has been purely to the English public, given the level of social policy devolution to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and to a lesser extent Wales, but in many cases it has been to the UK as a whole. Even in those cases where the devolved nations had autonomy, it was (and remains) important for Westminster to appear 'in control' of the situation, or to sell an ethos to a *United* Kingdom, even if concrete policy decisions ultimately differ.

The data collected spans from the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 to Jan-Feb 2021, when the UK was emerging from its second wave. This period was chosen as it represents the period in which the UK state was on its most reactive footing. The period from January 2021 onwards was epitomised by the roll-out of the various Covid-19 vaccines, which enabled the state (and the devolved administrations) to develop new policy and public health strategies to address the pandemic. The initial phase of the pandemic and the UK's response came at a time when the UK was deeply embroiled in fairly hostile negotiations with the EU (in rhetoric, if not in practice) over the Northern Ireland Protocol. This was also the 'crisis response' phase, in which policy had to be made quickly, without precedent and while attempting to not compromise on other policy priorities, as well as maintaining a strong position in negotiations with the EU. At the time of writing, the UK is entering a different phase of the Covid response, in which policy could be designed with the longer-term in mind. This is a limitation of the current study, given that longer-term policy planning will likely include a more considered and calculated approach to nation building and the building of imagined community. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how the UK's sense of itself and its projected political and social future was represented in, and perhaps influenced, policy. Further research will capture developments in the later phases of the pandemic response and compare them to the initial crisis response phase.

Data was organised and coded using NVivo 12. This ensured that data was treated systematically, following a consistent coding process, and allowed for a large amount of qualitative data to be produced, handled and analysed. Nevertheless, coding was conducted manually via the software and abductively; initial coding involved a set of codes generated deductively from scholarly literature, news sources and general context. This code list was then refined inductively, allowing a select number of codes to emerge from a close reading of the raw data.

The data was subjected to a combination of content analysis and thematic analysis. Vaismoradi and Turunen (2013) argue that notwithstanding the many similarities, identification of patterns and themes, providing cross-sections of data, the main difference is that content analysis allows for

[2] At the beginning of the pandemic, these briefings were daily. As the pandemic developed, the regularity of the televised briefings changed in line with the severity of different waves, the status of national and local lockdowns, and the prominence of particular developments of interest to the public, such as vaccines.

[3] This is in contrast to the *public health* response, led by Prof. Chris Whitty, Prof. Patrick Vallance, Prof. Jonathan Van Tam, etc. This is a largely arbitrary division between political and non-political, considering the burgeoning work on the politics of expertise, and the politics of the public health response itself (e.g. Hulme *et al.,* 2020). However, given the focus of this chapter on the relationship between policy and imagined communities, it is an appropriate distinction to define the boundaries of the study.

'quantification' of qualitative data. This chapter does not embark of a quantification of data; it does not engage in 'keyword counting' or similar. Rather, a combination of the two methods allows the analysis to not only highlight core themes and relationships in the data pertaining to building cohesion and the imagined community of the British nation, but also to highlight salient ideas worthy of deeper consideration by virtue of their prominence in the data.

Table 1 shows the most prevalent codes in the data. However, this cannot speak to the prominence of the codes. It is possible that not very prevalent codes carry significant importance.

Table 1: major codes with description and number of references

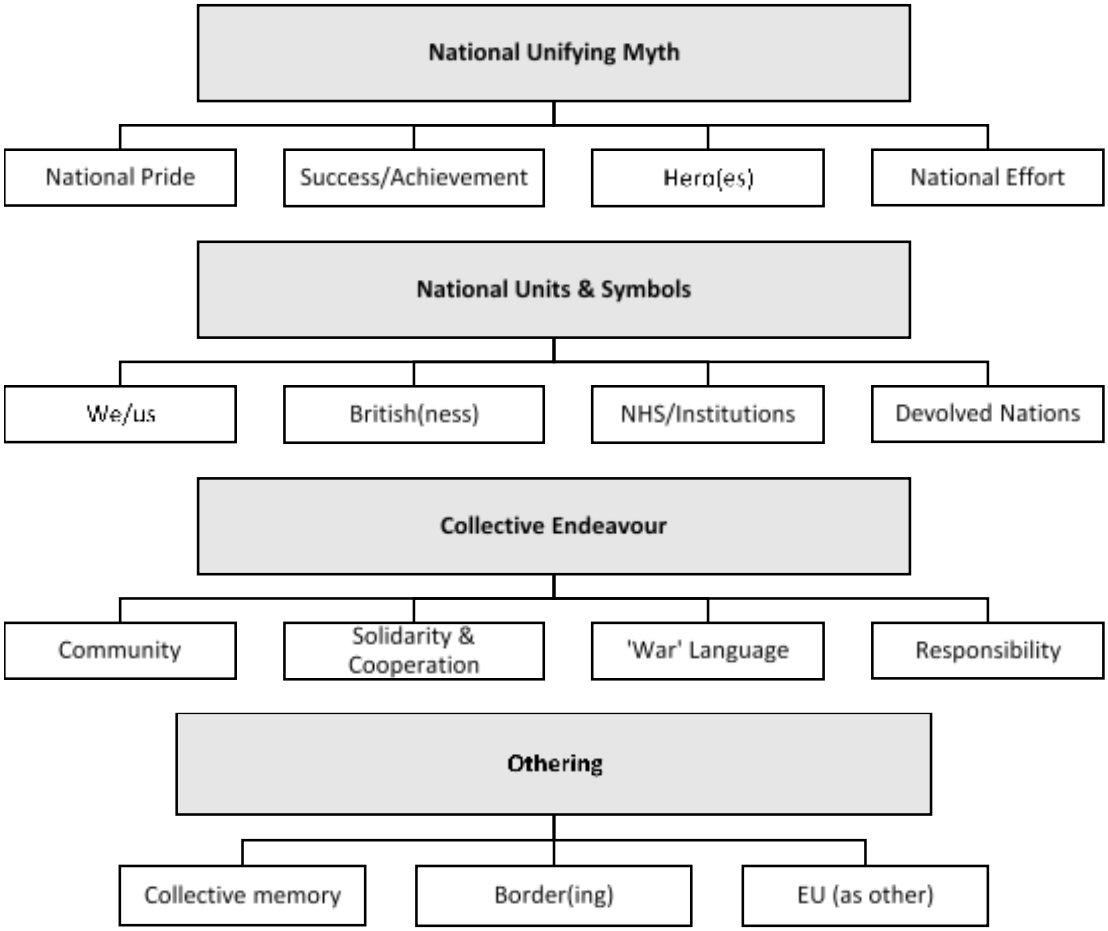
Code	Description	References
'national effort'	Explicit or implicit references to making a national effort (e.g. use of the phrase, or phrases that invoke a sense of nation and (common) endeavour.	95
British(ness)	Words, phrases or passages that talk about the British, British traits, or carry connotations of 'Britishness'.	75
Solidarity and cooperation	References to working together, particularly when invoking a sense of solidarity (national or otherwise) and co-operation at a national, local or community level.	65
NHS plus institutions	References to the NHS primarily, but also to public institutions, especially when relevant to Covid or Brexit.	64
'War' language	Linguistic references that make use of tropes related to war (e.g. fighting a common enemy, vanquishing the virus, 'frontlines'), military operations, or wartime civilian conduct.	58
Success or achievement	References to successes, whether concrete or abstract. Particular attention was paid to achievements in the name of the nation (e.g. British successes, government success, public success etc.).	58
Responsibility	References to the need to take responsibility, identifying loci of responsibility, particularly regarding public health.	54
National pride	References to being proud of the nation, Britain/UK etc., or implicit references that have connotations of pride.	37
devolved nations	Direct references to the devolved nations.	27
Hero(es)	Invocation of heroism or labelling entities heroic.	26
border(ing)	Invocation or discussion of physical or metaphorical borders; using rhetoric to draw borders, especially between 'British' and 'non-British'	24
we and us	Invocation of a collective 'we' that is otherwise not defined (e.g. as British etc.).	20
Community	References to 'community' – be that local neighbourhoods, international	16

These codes share similarities. For example, an intuitive link can be made between *collective memory, we/us, national pride,* and *Britishness.* Yet the codes are also discrete and contain unique elements. So although they present differently, they interact and combine to strengthen particular tropes, emphasise some rhetoric over others and frame issues in particular ways. This all contributes to the presentation of a specific imagined community. Also, given the focus of the subject matter, it is not

surprising that codes focused on the nation, co-operation, national or otherwise important institutions are most prominent. It is what is said within these codes that is significant.

Codes were then organised into overarching themes. Each theme connected a group of codes, providing an opportunity to analyse their interrelation and the implications of these connections. Given the overlaps between codes in terms of their content and their potential for alternative interpretation, figure 1 below represents an organisation of themes that makes sense in the context of the overarching question of the chapter. It is feasible, therefore, that organising these codes differently may give rise to different themes. The organisation was driven by central questions and the theoretical framework employed in the analysis, which privileges and makes sense of social cohesion building and to a lesser extent nation building.

Figure 1: Overarching themes and component codes



The 'thematic content' analysis was structured through a theoretical framework that draws upon Scheifer and Van der Noll's (2017) review of the state of the art of social cohesion. Scheifer and Van der Noll's starting point is to address the prominent issue of a lack of consensus in the social cohesion literature. Through an in-depth engagement with the literature, they identify three 'constitutive elements' of social cohesion: Social relations, Identification with the social entity, and orientation towards the common good (Scheifer and Van der Noll, 2017: 595). During the coding process and the re-reading of the data, components of these elements were highlighted. For example, under the umbrella of *social relations* one could expect to find allusions to or explicit discussion of social networks, trust, acceptance (or otherwise) of diversity, participation, and relations between nations. For *identification with the social entity* in the context of this study one would expect to see mentions

of the state and/or nation and presentation of key cultural institutions, an enhancement of Britishness potentially alongside de-emphasising or selectively contextualising the constituent nations. Under *orientation towards the common good* one may expect invocations of a common enemy against which 'all' can rally against, or exhortations to protect sacred institutions, such as in the slogan 'Stay Home, *Protect the NHS*, Save Lives'.

It is important to emphasise the dual nature of social cohesion. On the one hand it is about creating a common bond across a social and political unit, in which there is co-operation, solidarity and (some) acceptance of difference. On the other hand, social cohesion is also necessarily about power maintenance, whether that is maintaining territorial integrity, (re)defining who may and may not become a member of the national 'club'. A crucial task for social cohesion in the UK is maintaining 'the ties that bind'. Yet, as argued earlier, 'Britishness' has always largely been Anglo-Britishness. Although Westminster has arguably struggled with this in recent years, especially with Brexit and the governance of the Covid response, England remains core to Britain, whilst Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remain in the periphery (e.g. Findlay *et al.,* 2002; Steed, 1986; Smout, 1980). The following sections explore these elements in the context of the UK government's framing of its policy response to Covid

(Re)Building the National Myth

In terms of social cohesion, a national myth provides a rallying point that is unaffected by circumstance. It facilitates identification with a/the social entity, which in itself could help define the 'common good' towards which communities (imagined or otherwise) may orientate. All nations have their creation myths and stories, either from ancient times or from the birth of the modern nation.

The UK is not in the process of creating a 'new' nation. In this sense the government is not embarking on a process of nation building in the traditional sense. Rather, it draws upon well-embedded tropes and imagery in order to (re)construct particular narratives of what it means to be British, and a part of the United Kingdom.

Throughout the briefings a clear message was adhered to, involving the need to act as a nation. Equally important was the reason for the nation to come together. In the briefings this was partly to protect vulnerable citizens, but especially to protect healthcare workers. These actors were afforded a kind of 'hero' status at the same time as being labelled as needing protection; this is somewhat of a paradox, given that traditionally heroes protect the vulnerable, and are not usually vulnerable themselves.

> Central to this work is the retention of those staff who have returned to help the NHS in our hour of need. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute and say thank you to the thousands of healthcare students, and former NHS staff who have played their part in helping the NHS tackle COVID-19. For some this has meant learning new skills or working in a different speciality – each individual will have had different experiences – but each has a place in the NHS if they want to remain and HEE will have an important job in equipping them to do so (DHSC, 2020).

The above extract places returning and trainee healthcare workers as exemplars of a national effort. Their actions are painted as a sacrifice. Here, healthcare workers are not vulnerable, but are instead helping *protect* the NHS, itself framed as vulnerable. On the other hand, this is less about a heroic national effort, given that the document itself is essentially focused on labour policy and employee retention. Historic staff shortages in the NHS require innovative solutions, such as accelerating training programmes, recruiting retirees etc. The Covid pandemic provided the context to legitimise action that would have not been possible in normal times.

The role of healthcare workers as prominent and upstanding members of the nation was also deployed to emphasise the perceived importance of maintaining the UK. Again, a practical consideration was framed in such a way as to highlight potential (if implied) deficiencies that needed neighbourly support to address:

> I want to extend thanks also to our ambulance service workers and in particular I want to thank ambulance service staff who stepped up over the weekend when an appeal went out from the Scottish ambulance service for extra help and ambulance services from the other nations stepped forward (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 25th January 2021).

The implicit message here, quite clearly, is that the nations of the UK must work together in times of crisis. However, it may imply something potentially more damaging. Scotland in recent years has edged closer towards independence from the UK, itself using social policy as a technique of nation building, articulating differences between Scotland and England (refs). The focus on Scotland needing to appeal to the other nations of the UK carries the implication that it cannot resource its own healthcare system without help from the rest of the UK. Although this is in the context of a crisis, and as such may not happen in normal times, it nevertheless paints the Scottish NHS as in a precarious position and in need of support if there are surges in need.

The careful framing of the originally daily Coronavirus briefings was designed on the one hand to inform the public about developments with the virus and how the government was responding. However, as this chapter will make clear, the briefings were also used to 'showcase' the UK primarily to those within the country, but also further afield. The UK is known for its 'theatrical' political style (REFS), which facilitates promotion. In the post-Brexit context, in which the UK must forge new relationships and find its place in the international order, the state must firstly promote the UK but also reassure the populace of the UK's position in the world:

> And of course, while this is a national effort to find these treatments, it's also an international effort. In the same way that we have donated more money to the global search for a vaccine than any other country, so too we will lead the world in this science of treatments and whatever we learn, we will share, because we are all on the same side in this war (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 3rd April 2020)

The thrust of this extract is to place in parity the national and international effort; one is of little use without the other. This signals that the UK is outward looking, encapsulating the slogan of 'global Britain'. Yet this imagery of international player or collaborator soon morphs into international leader. The UK has donated more money, leads the world in treatments, etc. Finally, the international leader is pitched as benevolent, returning to the imagery of collaboration, in sharing 'whatever we learn'.

It is clear that this national effort is led by talismanic figures in health, but also from the corporate world:

> Many businesses have generously come forward with offers to turn over their production lines as part of this national effort. In particular, I want to thank Burberry, with their offers of gowns; Rolls-Royce and McLaren, who are creating visors; Ineos and Diageo, who are producing hand sanitiser. We're talking to many others and we want more to step up to the plate (Health Secretary statement on Coronavirus, 10th April 2020)

The businesses the Health Secretary chose to mention here are important as they are quintessentially British. It implicitly highlights a supposed innovation, but also an independence from reliance on other states. These are not companies who manufacture the required products. Indeed, as was well

publicised at the time, the equipment and PPE procurement process was significantly flawed (e.g. McKee, 2021). Again, this is an advert for 'Global Britain' dressed up as a response to a health crisis. The social policy implications of this bolster the *nation* but weaken the role of the *state.* It is a social policy framework that prioritises private actors and interests, whilst government agencies scramble to fill vacancies in the NHS, as highlighted earlier.

Part of this response, then, is to demonstrate a strong and dynamic social entity that a population can rally round, especially in a crisis. It attempts to demonstrate a 'all in the same boat' mentality that is important to building social cohesion. Another core element of this is emphasising national symbols.

National Symbols for all?

National symbols can be built through the construction of national myths, or they can support those myths. They can also act as a shorthand for particular values that the nation upholds, which tend to be required for membership of the polity. These national symbols also provide visual representations for the social entity, shared values and common goals that a polity and society should orientate towards.

Unsurprisingly, the most prominent national symbol deployed was the NHS. As Wincott (2020) has demonstrated, the NHS occupies a privileged position in the UK's national imaginary, often referred to by politicians as 'our NHS'. It is deployed variously, to encourage personal responsibility, to ask for sacrifices, as well as to highlight perceived unique strengths of the UK:

> The single most important economic policy in the short term is rolling out the vaccine as quickly as possible, where thanks to *our extraordinary NHS*, we have already vaccinated over 20 million people across the UK. But as restrictions ease we need to look ahead to the future sources of jobs and growth. Now that we have left the EU we have the opportunity to forge a new path as a fully sovereign trading nation, doing things differently, more nimbly and better (HM Treasury, 2021b: 8; emphasis added)

This passage from HM Treasury's *Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth* highlights the government's thinking in terms of the timeline on which it has placed itself; moving from the Brexit process, through the Covid pandemic, and into the post-Brexit, post-Covid era. Although not a revelation, passages such as this highlight that the vaccination programme can just as much be seen as an economic and/or labour policy as a public health policy. The public is understandably worried about jobs and growth thanks to the immediate impact of the pandemic, but this has also been a well-publicised impact of the Brexit process. The Covid pandemic allows the partial sanitisation of the negative political and economic effects of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, leaving only the positive story of a sovereign trading nation, doing things 'differently, more nimbly and better'.

It is important to consider the presentation of the NHS as a national symbol to 'all' against the policy realities. Tensions between the impacts of Brexit and the Covid pandemic are evident, especially with regards to ensuring adequate labour supply. The message from public statements was one of collective sacrifice, solidarity and diversity, acknowledging the contribution of economic migrants to the UK:

> I am awed by the dedication of my colleagues on the frontline – every single person who contributes to the running of this *diverse and caring institution* that our nation holds so dear. These were people who *came to this country to make a difference*. And they did. And they have given their lives in service, in sacrifice. We salute you (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 2nd April 2020 – emphasis added).

The contribution of migrants is the clear focus, although implicitly it is a focus on the 'right kind' of migrant; one who, in the public eye, contributes positively to the economy and society[4]. This invokes a subtle process of bordering and othering, in which migrants are required to demonstrate a much higher level of deserving or virtuousness to integrate into British society. It follows Wingard's (2012) use of the 'other' and 'other-other' in a process of neoliberal nation building: the other is an outsider who is nevertheless redeemable, while the other-other has no hope of integrating and thus kept outside the borders for the good of both the migrant and the nation. This idea of good and bad 'others' can also be seen in NHS recruiting strategy in the post-Brexit and post-Covid context:

> 'We remain committed to delivering 50,000 more nurses in the NHS, but clearly the context for the delivery of that commitment has changed. While we will continue to welcome overseas staff as an invaluable part of the NHS team, the pandemic poses extra challenges for the recruitment of staff from overseas and justifies an even greater focus on enlarging our home grown workforce' (DHSC, 2020: np)

The Department of Health and Social Care's mandate to Health Education England provides an interesting case study of how policy may react to public discourse, or vice versa. The mandate focuses on the challenges posed by Covid on recruitment of international staff, thus justifying a more intensive domestic labour recruitment and training strategy. Yet, it is well-known that prior to the pandemic, and still today, Brexit has had a huge effect on NHS recruitment (BMJ, 2017; McHale *et al.,* 2020). Furthermore, the legacy of Theresa May's 'hostile environment' and current Home Secretary Priti Patel's aggressive anti-migrant rhetoric should not be underestimated. This was compounded by the comments of the (until July 2021) heir apparent chief of the NHS, Dido Harding, who caused controversy after remarks that the NHS should become 'less reliant on foreigners' - a challenge given that at least 14% of the NHS workforce have a nationality other than British (McKay, 2021; see also Faragher, 2021; Hinsliff, 2021; Pogrund, 2021).

The Covid pandemic has been used to launch a rallying call in defence of the most emotive and evocative national symbol in the modern UK. Yet, despite the prominent framing in public statements of commitment to diversity and solidarity, the policy underpinning the NHS tends toward more nativist labour strategies, in line with domestic policy developments in the wake of Brexit. Furthermore, the overriding message from the 'Build Back Better' strategy and Budget is the imperative to maintain the UK territorial integrity. Given the difficulty of rolling-back existing devolution, this is likely to involve consolidation of economic and political competences where possible post-Brexit, alongside the warnings that the constituent nations cannot 'go it alone' regarding developing and financing their own social and economic programmes. The Covid pandemic has proved useful in this respect, facilitating these developments as a response to the pandemic and the need to remain united.

Collective Endeavour

This chapter so far has emphasized the importance of forms of solidarity and collective action, whether this is in service to a core social entity, to uphold particular values, or to strive towards a common good. These activities are core to social cohesion building. Imagery around collective endeavour can be deployed in terms of carrot *and* stick; a positive sense of groups and individuals coming together to work for the common good on one hand, or admonishment of those slow to answer the call, or who may refuse.

[4] This is a common trope, especially in UK social policy discourse, concerned with whether migrants are net contirbutors or beneficiaries of various supports available in the UK. There is not time to discuss this in this chapter.

Another key element of building social cohesion is the premise of breaking down barriers. Although a clear (social) division of labour – which can be based upon various social groupings and divisions – is central to a socially cohesive unit such as a country so that every member knows their role, it can help to break these barriers down. A crisis such as the Covid pandemic is the ideal opportunity in which to remove such barriers, at least figuratively:

> 'And it really inspires me, how people are helping in adversity. Like a grandson, helping their grandma to book an appointment online, or neighbours dropping off essentials on the doorstep, or the community groups that are getting together to help drive people to a vaccination centre so that people can get that all important jab' (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 18th Jan 2021).

The image here is of resourceful local communities, helping one another within and beyond the family unit. It is clearly evocative of the rhetoric of David Cameron's 'Big Society', and of Conservative approaches to social welfare in general. It also plays into embedded tropes of the resourcefulness of the British people, something which PM Boris Johnson has referred to often throughout the pandemic. The salient point is that, just as 'the virus does not discriminate', nor should the nation. All groups have their part to play, regardless of the scale.

However there are clear, if implicit, divisions that are constructed through the government's messaging, especially on the relationship between employment and public health policy. Compare the two extracts below and the loci of responsibility in each:

> *It is your civic duty*, so you avoid unknowingly spreading the virus and you help to break the chain of transmission. This will be voluntary at first, because we trust everyone to do the right thing. But we can quickly make it mandatory if that's what it takes (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 27th May 2020 – emphasis added).

> And my message to employers is crystal clear. Please work with us to ease the transition back to a more normal way of life for shielding employees. *We expect you to do the right thing* (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 22nd June 2020 – emphasis added).

For individuals, following public health guidance is *civic duty,* which can be enforced if compliance is not satisfactory. For businesses, compliance is *expected.* The former is essentially a legal threat, while the latter is a moral exhortation. There is little to no coercion implied in the latter extract. This encapsulates the Conservative government's self-imposed dilemma regarding trade-offs between public health and economic growth. Following the argument that social policy is subordinated to economic policy (e.g. Walker and Wong, 2009), this is perhaps no surprise. However, alongside the first extract in this section, the message is that social support is something that should be decentralised to individuals where possible, either through concrete policy mechanisms or through 'soft power' and 'nudge' style initiatives. Again, the Covid pandemic provides an opportunity to solidify such approaches through a (legitimate) need for all members of society (individuals, businesses or other institutions) to 'do their part'.

This is reinforced through a link to national heroes or prominent national institutions, which can be imbued with desirable values and normative:

> I want to start by thanking everyone who is staying at home, even in this sunshine. Together, we are slowing the spread of this virus. And I want to pay a special tribute today to Captain Tom Moore who, at the age of 99, has raised over £7 million so far for NHS charities by

> completing 100 laps of his garden. Captain Tom, you're an inspiration to us all and we thank you (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 12th April, 2020).

The elevation of a 99-year-old ex-military officer to the status of national institution plays a multifaceted role. Firstly, the military connection connotes service to the nation. In this case it is to raise money for the NHS. This reinforces the tropes of protection discussed earlier, but also reinforces a subtext of individual responsibility; if a 99-year-old man with mobility issues can raise so much money, what are others doing to help? The framing is one of 'inspiration', that simultaneously responsibilises others. Furthermore, it reinforces implicit assumptions around the financing and development of social policy from a Conservative standpoint, that is, largely hands-off and left to individuals and communities where possible (beyond the obvious need for the state to legislate for and regulate key institutions and actors associated with social policy). Again, this is wrapped in the context of a crisis necessitating everyone to work beyond usual expectations of citizens. The Covid pandemic facilitates a sense of necessity for individuals to struggle together to fund and support basic services, the impetus for which may not exist as prominently in 'normal' times.

Additionally, one person's perceived sacrifice in service of the 'greater good' serves to emphasise the detrimental effects of division, whether that is between classes, ethnicities, or nations. 'Captain Tom' serves as an artefact for a sense of not just collective, but *national* endeavour, whilst also lauding individual entrepreneurship and industriousness.

Just as membership means little without those denied membership, a social cohesion that includes all groups, all people at all times would mean little in practice. Social cohesion in the context of the nation tends to require something to be cohesive against, as well as something to be cohesive for. For the UK in the current period the nation requires cohesion against Covid, but also against the European 'other' (see Donoghue and Kuisma, 2021). It attempts to build cohesion for the 'British' nation, through (amongst other things) policy that is expansive in terms of who it claims to include or represent, whilst remaining restrictive in terms of funding but also eligibility and deservingness.

Defining Members and Others

As Joppke (2008: 533; see also Nassehi and Schroer, 1999: 83) highlights,

> modern citizenship has been marked by a tension between "universal inclusion and particularistic exclusion". One the one hand, the rise of modern citizenship thrives on the idea of shared humanity and of universal human rights, as developed by the European Enlightenment. On the other hand, such universalism had to be reconciled with the particularism of states, without which the promise of "liberty, equality, solidarity" could never be a reality.

Social cohesion is, in essence, a representation of the universalistic element of citizenship. Every member is to be included and has a role to play, and these roles contribute to the health of the polity, nation, and state. In order to have a cohesive entity, it needs boundaries that distinguish it from the 'other' (different nations and values are two examples; even where programmes of social cohesion laud diversity of values, they are set within certain tolerances).

The promotional nature of the Coronavirus briefings especially enabled ministers to respond to a range of issues under the guise of the Covid crisis. These were framed by the implicit and explicit calls for unity and co-operation to fight the virus. It thus facilitated Ministers to appear to address pressing issues, while using the crisis to suppress discussion. For example, around the time of the Black Lives

Matter Protests the then Health Secretary used the briefings as an opportunity to address division and diversity, both society wide and within the NHS:

> Black lives matter and I want to say this to everyone who works in the NHS and in social care. I value the contribution that you make, everybody equally. And I want to say it right across society too. I want to thank you and I want you to know that our whole country cares about your wellbeing. And I value too those who come to our country to work in the NHS and in social care. And I love that this country is one of the most welcoming and tolerant and diverse. That goes for the whole country and it goes especially for the health and social care system (Health Secretary Statement on Coronavirus, 2nd June 2020).

Whilst the ostensible purpose of the Covid briefings was to share information about the response to the pandemic, they were also used to shore-up social institutions against criticism, or to help rebuff criticisms of the government's stewardship of these institutions. This extract can be read in the light of previous discussions in this chapter on the tension between promoting diversity and the realities of employment policy in the NHS, and indeed labour policy in the UK post-Brexit. Covid has acted as a useful smokescreen for such reforms, given that a state of crisis allows for more executive-style decision making, especially compared to a political decision upon which the country remains almost equally split.

Given that division of labour is core to social cohesion, one would expect to find tensions between or acknowledgements of multiple loci of responsibility within the entity. Regarding the public health response, the UK government employed such a strategy:

> Although we are tackling this virus as one United Kingdom, it remains the case that the devolved administrations are responsible for lockdown in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. And it is right that they move at the right pace for them, according to their circumstances (Prime Minister's Statement on Coronavirus, 10th June 2020).

This can be read in two ways. On the one hand it is a simple acknowledgement that the UK is a multinational state that is operating a multispeed public health response. On the other, it subtly highlights loci of responsibility for public health, helping Westminster shift some responsibility. It highlights the fractured nature of policymaking in the UK. Here, it is important to understand the other messages circulating from central government, especially the Treasury. As has been shown, a strong focus of the Treasury has been emphasising the importance of the Union, especially for the devolved nations:

> Today's figures speak for themselves […] As we continue to see throughout this pandemic, the strength of the Union and support offered by the UK Treasury has never been more important (GOV.UK, 2021)

The image presented by the briefings and by government policy is the necessity of unity. This is unity of the public to fight the virus, unity of the nations of the UK to work together, and a reminder of the 'ties that bind'. Contrasting this extract with the previous extract, the composite image is a union in which membership is technically voluntary, but presented as a practical necessity. Again, the pandemic has been used to bolster the message that everyone (nation or otherwise) needs to stick together.

Allowing the Covid crisis to be the prism for the negative, recent budgets have been able to present post-Brexit developments in a positive light, while also emphasising the role of a united UK in a post-EU world:

> In repatriating the EU structural funds, the government has an historic opportunity to design a UK Shared Prosperity Fund to match domestic priorities. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund will replace the overly bureaucratic EU structural funds, levelling up opportunity in each of the four nations of the country. Funding will be realigned to match domestic priorities, not the EU's, with a focus on investing in people (HM Treasury, 2020: 49).

The extract is designed to promote an innovative, efficient UK in contrast to an overly burdensome and bureaucratic EU. This is significant given that the Shared Prosperity Fund would be a key economic support for many social policies. It promises 'levelling up opportunity in each of the four nations', yet the Institute for Government asserts that it 'risks further damaging trust between the UK and devolved administrations and undermining the UK government's objective of binding the four nations of the UK closer together' (Nice *et al.,* 2021: 30). This supports the argument that a core aim of the UK government is to centralise power (economic, social and political) where possible, whilst appearing committed to a more open and conciliatory method of securing the union. As Wincott demonstrates,

> 'In July 2020, the UK Government's Internal Market White Paper heralded the end of the Brexit transition/implementation period as bringing with it the "single biggest transfer of powers to the devolved administrations in history", but one which is predicated on the UK being "a unitary state" which would also see an expanded role for Whitehall in overseeing these new arrangements' (Wincott *et al.,* 2021: 12; see also BEIS, 2020, para 12; para 16).

This strategy can only be achieved if the UK can sell itself as an open, global actor, that is committed to diversity and integration at home. As this chapter has demonstrated, references to this re-imagined UK are peppered throughout the Coronavirus statements and grey literature. The core takeaway is that the new UK remains at the forefront of the global order, and in control of both its internal and external borders. It is at once global and national:

> We reject narrow nationalism. We support a global effort, because this virus respects no borders. And we are all on the same side. This morning I held a global conference call with other health leaders, including from Germany, Australia, Canada, Switzerland and the United States and others, to discuss the need for global licensing access for any successful vaccine (Health Secretary Statement to Parliament, 20th July 2020 – HC Deb 20 July 2020).

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on Westminster's (presentation of its) response to the Covid pandemic, and the implications for public and social policy in service of re-building the (Anglo-)British imagined community. The research was constrained in scope, but has provided a compelling foundation for exploring the phenomena in this chapter further. In particular, future research should focus on the policy pronouncements of the other nations of the UK, especially Scotland (e.g. Law and Mooney, 2012), which can be compared to the UK-wide framing, drawing out tensions around the re-construction of the imagined community.

As the saying goes, don't let a good crisis go to waste. The UK government has utilised the Covid crisis as a means of re-asserting the territorial integrity of the UK, and attempted to re-invigorate the imagined community. The covid briefings in particular, but also important policy documents in the areas of health and finance, have been used as a platform to promote Britain to both its own citizens and to the wider world. They have also been used to re-assert the 'ties that bind' the United Kingdom, using a blend of the carrot and the stick; an acknowledgement and even embrace of devolution on the one hand, with sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle assertions of the constituent nations of the UK's need for one another.

This could be achieved partly because of the nature of the crisis, which elevated the importance of the social policy response (especially in health) and emphasised the social aspects of other policy areas. The importance of solidarity, whether implicit or explicit, lent itself to calls for unity and co-operation. This in turn provided an ideal platform to promote social policy. However, what can be seen is a tension between the solidaristic and co-operative rhetoric seen in much of the briefings and policy literature against a typical Conservative approach to welfare and social policy that continues to prioritise individual endeavour and a largely hands-off role for the state. This means that, notwithstanding the crucial role of the state during the pandemic, in the re-imagined community of the United Kingdom a re-imagined approach to social policy seems unlikely. The ultimate conclusion, then, is that the Covid briefings in particular can be seen largely as a co-ordinated PR exercise for the Conservative government in the UK, attempting to rebrand 'Global Britain' and re-enforce the territorial integrity of the Union, legitimised via prominent elements of the social policy response to the pandemic.

Bibliography

Anderson, B. (1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* London: Verso

Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J., Matthews, F. (2020), The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 74(11). DOI: 10.1136/jech-2020-214401

BEIS (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy). (2020). UK Internal Market (CP 278)

Béland, D., Lecours, A. (2008), *Nationalism and Social Policy: The Politics of Territorial Solidarity.* Oxford: OUP

Bhattacharjee, A., Nguyen, D., Venables, T. (2020), The prospects for regional disparities in the UK in times of Brexit and Covid-19. *National Institute Economic Review* 253: R1-R3

Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) (2020), *The Department of Health and Social Care mandate to Health Education England: April 2020 to March 2021.* Accessed online 13/10/2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-education-england-mandate-2020-to-2021/the-department-of-health-and-social-care-mandate-to-health-education-england-april-2020-to-march-2021

Farnsworth, K., Irving, Z. (2015), *Social Policy in Times of Austerity: Global Economic Crisis and the New Politics of Welfare.* Bristol: Policy Press

Ferragina, E., Zola, A. (2021), The end of austerity as Common Sense?: An experimental analysis of public opinion shifts and class dynamics during the Covid-19 crisis. *New Political Economy.* DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2021.1952560

Ferrera, M. (2005), *The Boundaries of Welfare: European Integration and the New Spatial Politics of Social Protection.* Oxford: OUP

Findlay, A.M., Stockdale, A., Stewart, E. (2002), Professional and managerial migration from core to periphery: the case of English migration to Scottish cities. *Population, Space and Place* 8(3): 217-232

Glynos, J., Klimecki, R., Willmott, H. (2012), Cooling out the Marks: The ideology and politics of the financial crisis. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 5(3): 297-320

GOV. UK (2020), *Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 3 April 2020.* Accessed online 13/10/2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-3-april-2020

GOV.UK (2020), *Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 10 April 2020.* Accessed online 13/10/2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-10-april-2020

GOV.UK (2021), *Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 25 January 2021.* Accessed online 13/10/2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-25-january-2021

HC Deb (20 July 2020). vol. 678, col. 1850. Accessed online 13/10/2021: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-07-20/debates/CEB1C545-2E55-4CD7-84D4-5CDC09C5F357/CoronavirusResponse

McKee, M. (2021), The UK's PPE procurement scandal reminds us why we need ways to hold ministers to account. *BMJ* 372: n639

HM Treasury (2020), *Budget 2020.* London: Stationery Office

HM Treasury (2021a), *Budget 2021.* London: Stationery Office

HM Treasury (2021b), *Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth.* London: Stationery Office

Hulme, M., Lidskog, R., White, J.M., Standring, A. (2020), Social scientific knowledge in times of crisis: What climate change can learn from coronavirus (and vice versa). *WIREs Climate Change* 11(4)

Keys, C., Nanayakkara, G., Onyejekwe, C., Sah, R.K., Wright, T. (2021), Health Inequalities and Ethnic Vulnerabilities During COVID-19 in the UK: A Reflection on PHE Reports. *Feminist Legal Studies* Jan 14: 1-12

Law, A., Mooney, G. (2012), Devolution in a 'Stateless Nation': Nation-building and Social Policy in Scotland. *Social Policy and Administration* 46(2): 161-177

Leisering, L. (2003), Nation State and Welfare State: An Intellectual and Political History. *Journal of European Social Policy* 13(2): 175-185

Lupton, R., Burchardt, T., Hills, J., Stewart, K., Vizard, P. (2016), *Social Policy in a Cold Climate: Policies and their consequences since the crisis.* Bristol: Policy Press

McEwen, N., Moreno, L. (2005), *The Territorial Politics of Welfare.* Basingstoke: Routledge

Mitchell, J. (1996), From unitary state to union state: Labour's changing view of the United Kingdom and its implications. *Regional Studies* 30(6): 607-611

Peck, J., Theodore, N. (2015), *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism.* Minneapolis: Duke University Press

Rokkan, S., Urwin, D.W. (1982), *The Politics of territorial identity: studies in European regionalism.* London: Sage

Scambler, G. (2020), Covid-19 as a 'breaching experiment': exposing the fractured society. *Health Sociology Review* 29(2): 140-148

Schiefer, D., van der Noll, J. (2017), The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review. *Social Indicators Research* 132: 579-603

Smout, T.C. (1980), Scotland and England: Is Dependency a Symptom or a Cause of Underdevelopment? *Review* 3(4): 601-630

Stanley, L. (2014), 'We're Reaping What We Sowed': Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity. *New Political Economy* 19(6): 895-917

Steed, M. (1986), The core-periphery dimension of British politics. *Political Geography Quarterly* 5(4): S91-S103

Tubadji, A., Webber, D.J., Boy, F. (2020), Cultural and economic discrimination by the Great Leveller: The COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. *Covid Economics* 13: 48-67

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., Bondas, T. (2013), Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing and Health Sciences* 15(3): 398-405

Wincott, D. (2020), "Imagined Solidarities: Brexit, Welfare, States, Nations and the EU". In Donoghue, M., Kuisma, M. (Eds.), *Whither Social Rights in (Post-) Brexit Europe? Opportunities and Challenges.* London: Social Europe Publishing. PP: 7-15

Wincott, D., Murray, C.R.G., Davies, G. (2021), The Anglo-British imaginary and the rebuilding of the UK's territorial constitution after Brexit: unitary state or union state? *Territory, Politics, Governance* DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2021.1921613

Wingard, J. (2012), *Branded Bodies, Rhetoric, and the Neoliberal Nation State.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books