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Does Scottish nationalism include ethnic minorities?

The vision for an independent Scotland and Scottish identity must include ethnic and racial minorities, a Northumbria University academic has argued on the BBC.

Dr Nasar Meer, a Reader in Social Science and co-Director of the Centre for Civil Society and Citizenship, shared his latest research into Scottish Nationalism on BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed programme in June.

As Scotland moves to an independence referendum in 2014 – deciding

whether or not to remain part of the United Kingdom – there has been much debate on national identity. For example, is Scottishness increasing and Britishness decreasing? If so, what are the implications for Englishness and Welshness too? Each of these topics is subject to intense discussion and sometimes public policy, but one question that is less frequently raised asks where ethnic and racial minorities fit into debates about Scottish nationalism?

Funded by the British Academy, Dr Meer's research is the first to focus on minorities in an independent Scotland. His study draws on interviews with Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), senior civil servants, journalists and intellectuals to examine whether politicians and influential elites are including minorities within their projects of nation building and concepts of Scottish identity.

Dr Meer's study identified three dominant visions for where minorities fit into and remake Scottish identity. The first, Aspirational Pluralism, suggests that political elites in Scotland do not seek to place ethnically exclusive barriers on being a member of Scottish nationhood, meaning that they are open to ethnic and racial minorities laying claim to and – at least theoretically – changing Scottish identity.

The second observation indicates that political elites are reshaping Scotland's legacy as part of the British Empire according to their own political leanings, creating a 'Multiform Role' for Scotland in imperial history.

Finally, the research noted that there were limitations to the new Scotland's ability to accommodate distinctive minority claims, such as multi-lingualism and a corporate multi-faith recognition.

Dr Meer said: "Sometimes dubbed the 'new Scots', visible minorities have a comparatively smaller presence in Scotland than they have in England, and they have been the object of fewer political controversies than in England as well. Yet at a time when all Scottish political parties are jockeying over a vision for the nation, are minorities included in these accounts?

"These are especially important questions while Scotland's population growth is being supported by migration, and that we have evidence that Scottish minorities are laying claim to Scottish identity too. How will these claims be met?

“Politically, Scottish national identity is being configured according to existing conceptions of church state-relations, prevailing norms of ‘civic’ participation and inclusion, and implicit notions of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ minority claims-making, amongst other things. My research argues that political elites can play a vital role in ensuring that we do not rely on an assumption that these are self-evidently inclusive, but that they are meaningfully calibrated to include minorities too.”

Dr Meer will present his findings during a keynote address entitled ‘Looking up? Scottish elite perspectives on the ‘new Scots’, at the international conference on Britishness in the 21st Century at Keele University on 19 June.

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