

Letter from Scotland



Camp fire at Kandersteg,
International Scout Centre,
Switzerland.

What is a nation ? Is it a geographical place or a people or a culture or a language or an economic territory or a political unit ? We are asking the question now in Scotland as we run up to the vote on independence on 18th September. They are asking the question rather more catastrophically in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and South Sudan.

I was prompted to ask the question during the Commonwealth Games as athletes from around the world paraded behind their various coloured flags. This last week I've been contemplating the question of nationality again while I was with my scout group at the international scout camp in Kandersteg in Switzerland. The flags and uniforms of 31 nations were paraded through the village on Swiss national day, 1st August, and were everywhere around the camp site. The camp fire circle was a melting pot of colours.



Main chalets at Kandersteg

When Baden-Powell founded the camp in 1923, the world was recovering from a war which was supposed to end all wars. It was to be the end of all nationalism. Instead it was the end of aristocracy and the world was split into dictatorships and democracies. Militant nationalism snaked along and, despite a heavy blow to the head in 1945, it still survives and comes bursting to the surface every now and again.

It can, of course, be confused with patriotism. Where one begins and the other ends is not clear and this is a great

pity. But the difference between nationalism and patriotism is like night and day, even though dusk and dawn are difficult to define.

So while my Edinburgh scouts mingled with scouts from 30 other nations, they still kept their own identity. In fact their patriotism swelled as their nationalism dwindled. We enjoyed setting up our Scottish stall on international fair day, with its Irn Bru and Tunnock biscuits on a Saltire table-cloth. We taught people how to dance Strip the Willow. Next to us an English group set up their stall serving tea and demonstrating how to play cricket. The Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, the Germans, the Dutch, the Danes, the Swedes, the Norwegians, the Icelanders all did the same their iconic brands.



Swiss Alps above Kandersteg

Baden Powell no doubt hoped that here in the neutrality and beauty of the Swiss alps, young people would learn the difference between patriotism and nationalism. It's to do with human kindness.

I was somewhat relieved to find when I came home from Switzerland that the referendum campaigners had indeed learned this lesson and the set-piece TV battle between Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling had not resulted in fisticuffs or riots in the streets.

But then Scotland's nationhood is not in question. We are one of the four nations in the United Kingdom. We are only discussing certain aspects of our independence. And this is a useful distinction which anti-EU campaigners in England and elsewhere might bear in mind. The European Union is not questioning anyone's nationhood, only the powers that each parliament should have.

One of the most moving moments of our trip to Kandersteg was

at the end of the rather rowdy camp fire evening when we were all asked to join hands and sing, very quietly and very slowly, the old slave spiritual, "Cum by yah."

"Someone's laughing Lord, Cum by yah (Come by here)

Someone's crying Lord, Cum by yah

Someone's praying Lord, Cum by yah

Oh Lord, Cum by yah. "

It was a lovely reminder that whatever our differences over nationality, culture, economic and political systems, it's individual people that are most important.