Defining the Nation

*TASK 1: Discuss/think about the following attempts to define the British as a nation. Then try and put aspects from the quotations under the headings in the table below.*

**John Major, former prime minister:** [Britain is a nation of] long shadows on county cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and - as George Orwell said - old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist.

**Tony Blair, a former British Prime Minister:** What defines Britishness are the shared values of tolerance, fair play, and decency.

**Deborah Moggach, novelist:** Britishness is newspapers, Marmite, pubs and the BBC - that is what people miss when they go abroad, and they must all be preserved and guarded jealously. It's also politeness - it's apologising, irony and self-mockery. It's speaking in codes and not saying what you mean, like telling someone "We must have lunch" when you can't stand them - unlocking those codes is getting to know what it is like to be British.

(Note - Marmite is a spread made from yeast extract which is very popular with some British people)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Places** | **Institutions** | **Objects Things** | **Values Ideas** | **Characteristics, Attitudes, Emotions** | **Historical events** | **Others?** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*TASK 2: Now take a while to attempt to define Slovakness/your own nationality. The categories in the table should help you to give a framework for this.*

*TASK 3: Look at the following four quotations of Britishness. Discuss and attempt to draw some conclusion on the subject of the definition of Britishness (Slovakness). Bellow are three more quotations to help you.*

**John Humphrys, broadcaster**: *I'm always slightly puzzled by any characterisation of a nation. Who exactly is "bold and brassy"? The old-age pensioner struggling to get by? Or the mum with a couple of kids who's worried about how they're getting on in school? You simply cannot apply global definitions to an entire society, for the obvious reason that we're all different. In the swinging sixties, I suspect it was about four per cent of London that was actually swinging, while the rest of the country wondered what "swinging" meant.*

**Yvonne Roberts, journalist:** *I, for one, am not much bothered about who we say we are as a nation. Rhetoric and symbolism come cheap. Let us be judged by how we behave.*

**Polly Toynbee, journalist:** *All attempts at national definition are bogus, sentimental, a-historical, dangerously exclusive of some parts of the population, narrowly self-limiting, arrogant and potentially aggressive.*

*As for our own self-image, the less national navel-gazing the better. Wave no flags, make no claims, try to do the right thing more often than we have in the past. National identity is constructed from a confection of selective memories according to political taste.*

**Raphael Samuel, historian:** *Britishness, instead of being a secure, genetic identity, can be seen as something culturally and historically conditioned, always in the making, never made.*

*Ideas for conclusion:*

* The variety of British definitions - is this the same for the Slovak ones?
* Why is it so difficult to define the nation?
* Is national culture a composite fiction?
* Is it necessary or even healthy to try to define the nation?

*TASK 4: Instructions are the same as for TASK 1. Have a look at the documents entitled ‘Quotes on Britishness’ and ‘How BBC online viewers’ views on what makes the British British’ and sort out aspects of Britishness mentioned in the quotes under the headings in the table.*