

# Consulting Group on Belief, Religion and Politics - Research data document pack

This document pack contains summaries and reflections treated as data for the Consulting Groups project (2022). The Consulting Groups project was part of UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) project Access Folk and developed by the FLF lead Prof. Fay Hield and Dr Esbjorn Wettermark at the University of Sheffield with project management from Dr Helen Grindley. This themed document pack is one of several related to the Consulting Groups project, all of which can be viewed and downloaded from The University of Sheffield's Online Research Data repository (ORDA).

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# **Access Folk Project**

## **Belief Religion and Politics**

### **Summary of Discussion:**

#### **Venues**

Different types of venues used for folk performances, in the past and present, were discussed and their links with political and religious institutions. The increasing use of churches as concert venues in their growing role as general community centres was noted. The influence of political and affiliation on venue use was also commented on – the anomalous use of right-wing Conservative Clubs as club and festival venues by a generally left-wing movement. It was also noted that Working Men's Clubs were, perhaps surprisingly, rarely used by folk clubs.

The role of pubs was examined. It was agreed that although they were the main venues for the folk revival in the 1950s onwards, they have been under increasing pressure because of changes in management and legislation.

It was mentioned that the pandemic has led to the development of online venues. Zoom singarounds which have increased the geographical access to folk as well as enabling focus on more specialised areas of folksong such as ballads and shanties.

#### **Identity**

The significance and importance of identity was an underlying theme in our discussions. It was noted that for groups separated from their “home” community, folk music was a way of reconnecting with their perceived “native” culture and for the affirmation of social identity. A similar idea was mentioned in more general terms

amongst folk music followers – the continuing importance of “cultural nostalgia”, looking back to a perceived “imagined village”.

It was also noted that politically, the generally left-wing affiliation of folksong performers and audience made participation in club meetings and festivals part of the process of self-identification and affirmation.

### **State Intervention and Control**

The major influence of past and current legislation on “access to folk” was a topic which emerged later in discussions. Firstly, state intervention in cultural activities was discussed. The importance of performance licensing and restriction was noted, and its influence on the running of folk clubs and festivals. Secondly the effect of changes in the education system and their possible impact was raised. The introduction of the National Curriculum closely controlled what was taught in schools, generally to the detriment of cultural subjects like music and art. It also introduced a major competitive influence through Ofsted which placed increasing stress on academic results rather than less-tangible cultural achievements in arts subjects.

Increasing control by central government and the down-grading of Local Education Authorities meant that under financial pressures cultural initiatives such as peripatetic music teaching, local singing festivals etc were obvious targets for cuts. It was noted that conversely, increased freedom enabled some academies to use their independence to enhance their focus on music.

### **Religion**

Religion did not form a major focus for discussion but there were several areas in which it was mentioned and considered. It was noted that many secular singers with no religious affiliation have for many years taken part in the singing of locally composed carols in pubs in the Sheffield area. It was also commented that although the performers of, and audience for English folksong might be mainly secular, the genre still reflected what was basically a Christian culture. This would how it would

be perceived by many of those from other faiths. Examples were noted where performers from Hindu, Muslim and Jewish cultures were welcomed to perform in English folk venues. The possible importance of fusion projects between cultures for the future development of the English folk scene was mentioned

## **Conclusion**

This subject area, of Belief, Religion and Politics was not an easy one. Often discussions seemed to move towards accounts of personal experience rather than drawing any conclusions. Personally, I did not feel we addressed the issue of faith in Religion; as a non-believer I would have liked to hear the views of a committed church member. Similarly with Belief; I think we need to spend more time on what was meant by this and then move onto to its significance for folk-singing.

I think perhaps that Politics was the easiest and the most fruitful area for discussion. The impact and significance of political decisions, through changes in the education system and increased levels of health and safety and public order control have an identifiable influence and effect on the access to folk in England. The importance of political decisions with regard to local and national broadcast media would also seem to be far-reaching.

Ruairidh Greig

16 July 2022

Personal Reflection

I have listened to and performed traditional folk music from the British Isles for over 50 years, most of my adult life. I have also researched and collected folksongs in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and Derbyshire, mainly for the University of Sheffield's National Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language (NATCECT).

This project has prompted me to reflect on my knowledge, experience and attitudes. I am coming to the conclusion that we are not looking at one "folk" but many. Each "folk" is a sub-culture. The folk which was the target of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were the mainly rural working class who had a separate cultural tradition which could be observed, recorded and potentially "revived" by collectors like Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Lucy Broadwood et al. This folk, already in decline because of agricultural changes, continued to dwindle until the last remnants were recorded by collectors in the 1970s and 1980s.

Another "folk" which overlapped with this was the maritime industry; again, modernisation and mechanisation hastened the decline of the shanty and the sea-song. Other examples of a "folk" some of which have received very little academic attention for a variety of reasons, could include rugby and other sporting groups, the military, youth groups such as Guides and Scouts and others. All these "folks" are sub-cultures which have had their own singing traditions. Some have received little or no scholarly attention.

Another "folk" is the singing tradition which grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by American researchers and performers like Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger and the Weavers and developed by Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Bert Lloyd and their followers. With an underlying socialist aegis, this "folk" embraced traditional songs from the British Isles and contemporary songs composed within the genre or commenting on current social issues. This "folk" has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

with a ready supply of younger performers, often progeny of older singers but with a steadily dwindling audience. The Folk Clubs and Festivals of my youth were full of people under 30; surviving examples with much smaller audiences are nearly all over 60. I can only see this decline continuing.

There is an underlying theme in the decline of folk traditions. There is continued economic pressure for music to become an exclusively marketable commodity. Singing, of any type, in schools has been increasingly side-lined in favour of what are perceived as more important or significant subjects and activities. The BBC has cut and cut again its schools' output and also severely reduced folk music output on both national and local radio. It is almost unimaginable that there was for many years a nightly television slot for folk musicians!

Government legislation since the 1980s has made it harder and harder for singing to take place in pubs, institutions which were often the main focus for community singing. Some new rules were deliberately designed to tackle perceived public order problems, other possibly well-intentioned changes like the ending of brewery monopolies and the smoking ban have contributed to the pub's inability to survive as a simple community centre without food, gambling machines etc.

Where music is on offer in public places it is technologically enhanced and closely controlled. Even "open mikes" and "karaoke nights" are focussed on individual performers, rather than involving community involvement, unlike the informal pub singsongs which were still happening in the Sheffield area in the 1970s.

An interesting anomaly is the "Sheffield carols", a local tradition of pub-singing sessions featuring locally composed Christmas songs in the area to the North of the city. This takes place in a number of pubs, usually but not exclusively at Sunday lunchtimes from Armistice Day to Christmas. The tradition was studied, recorded and

documented in the early 1970s. It was then introduced, through LPs, cassette recordings, printed books and related events to the folk revival in clubs and festivals. A tradition that was little known even on the other side of its home city now has national popularity and singers congregate from all over the UK and beyond to participate. Could there be lessons here to learn for Access to Folk?

I am pessimistic about singing in England in general and in folk singing in particular. People might point to community choirs as an example of a continuing singing tradition, but they are shadows of what we once had, in living memory. Gone are the market day “sing say or pay” sessions, the pub sing-songs, the sod’s operas, the campfire singing, the bus trip choruses, the Singing Together radio programmes and the family party pieces. Our world is poorer for their loss.

Ruairidh Greig 16 July 2022

## Comments from the group :

Several in the group thought that the discussions had been a bit more nuanced than suggested by the analysis, but agreed that not everything that got said in small group discussions ended up in the notes used for the analysis which might explain the slightly different perceptions. Chris B, pointed out that Christianity had been an important drive for some folk singers, leading at times to controversy. Vin Garbutt’s catholic convictions around abortion made him write and often perform the song “little innocence”. Many club organisers asked him not to perform the song when they booked him and when he often did so anyway he was also dropped by some organisers. One could claim that this was a form of censorship within the folk scene, but there is also the freedom of organisers not to book acts that are divisive or that may give them a bad reputation.

In relation to state intervention, the impact of Arts Council England was also discussed. Although purportedly working according to an arms-length distance from politics, ACE priorities are clearly aligned with current political trends and priorities. It would be interesting to look at how changing governments and ACE priorities have impacted on funding levels for folk arts organisations over time.

# Fay's quick scan analysis of the Beliefs group

## Key points

Venue associations / disassociation - Universities were popular, less so now. Some clubs meet in Conservative clubs, an unusual pairing given the 1970s culture. Many use church halls. Pubs (and associations with alcohol) strong part of the folk aesthetic. Although these are used as community spaces and direct affiliation is not essential, people still need to feel comfortable attending such spaces.

Personal/group liberal leftist politics is a lot less pronounced than it was, but is still ingrained in perceptions of the scene and has echoes. A certain type of person is assumed to be contemporary folk audience but they are not typically so. This can be off putting if people don't want to finger in the ear lefty so they don't come at all, but also disillusioning for leftist people hoping to find the same, but meeting older, more conservative, people.

More than a singing group, social group with shared ideology - online offers space to really specialize communities - online protest songs for example.

People join for personal reasons then a group identity forms - or if a group identity is already apparent, they need to feel comfortable within it in order to stay.

In the folk scene, people tend to come for love of the music rather than the politics, but there are politically engaged artists who can cross into the scene and bring people interested because of the politics.

Folk music is still seen as anti corporate in both free for all performance, and as a record of an alternative history.

Folk singing as a way to perform own identity. Self curation, identification with a group/concept. Can connect with history, develop links with a group identity. Perhaps more than nostalgia, way to navigate a place in the world and explore loss.

BUT the music can also be a way to talk 'about' another group (radio ballads), or be singing songs from another group separated from the folk scene (eg coal miners/travellers).



Certain identities given higher qudos - some put off because they perceive themselves too rich, too foreign, these aren't their songs. Worries about being offensive or misunderstood.

Some people want to expressively share political/belief systems with others, others don't feel folk clubs are the place for this.

Legislation affects activity, both directly (covid lockdowns/fire regulations) and indirectly (organisers not wanting to get involved with things like PRS)

Move away from local council power has removed regional decisions and financial allocation to local activity/heritage.

National curriculum has changed (removed?! ) children's exposure and experience of folk music. Though move to academies might offer a way in as some are focusing more on music.

Although not usually performed as a religious act, there is a lot of reference to Christianity in the repertoire. This connection is often downplayed/ignored. It also offers many contrasts/comparisons with older traditions - eg wassailing.

Other religions very rarely included in repertoires unless derogatory (Jews for example) and usually from the white christian perspective.

Current political concept is more about tolerance and apoliticalness rather than older model of protest song.

Difference between values and political affiliation - a focus on the former could reduce tensions.

Folk repertoire is used by different political groups outside the commonly recognised folk scene to advance their own cause (Extinction Rebellion; Traditional Britain Group)

## Issues

The discussion covers a good deal of ground over religion, politics, less so on general beliefs, but these are interesting interwoven in shared beliefs underlying the other two more formalised titled areas. The group's comments seem to mostly be coming from the perspective of the left of centre tolerant, as reflects the majority of people engaged with the folk singing scene. However, the perspectives on right wing appropriation/using religious venues for secular folk singing are inevitably coloured due to this.