

Identity and the Contradictions of Dual Nationality: A Personal Perspective

Dr Berhane Woldemichael – 28 March 2021

I am a dual Eritrean and British national having become a British national by naturalisation in 1987. I was also an Ethiopian national at one stage by an accident of history when Eritrea was united with Ethiopia under a United Nations imposed federal arrangement. Eritrea had to pass through a thirty-year bloody war to achieve its independence in 1991. I have covered that part of history elsewhere and it is not of particular interest in this reflection.

To me, identity and nationality have distinct differences. Identity has a distinguishing characteristic that separates people from one to the other. In a sense, it is based on one's racial classification. From that angle, I consider myself Eritrean through and through and a black African in the British way of racial classification.

Nationality on the other hand is a belonging to a nation, a country. From that perspective, can a dual national really belong equally to two countries? Some sports people have to make the difficult decision of choosing one country when faced with that kind of challenge but, what if the two nations that one belongs to go to war? Thankfully, the possibility of that happening between Eritrea and the United Kingdom is as remote as Mars is from Earth but where would my loyalty ultimately lie if that were to happen?

One advantage, if it can be called that, of the lockdown during the pandemic was that it has given me time to immerse myself in deeper thoughts. I have reflected about life, about marriage, about religion, about health and aging and at one particular time about my dual nationality.

During the first phase of the lockdown in the UK, there was an incident that changed my perspective about nationality. I must admit, were I to face the sports people's challenge of choosing from an Eritrean or UK team before the pandemic, I would definitely have gone for Eritrea for no apparent reason but just because of my attachment to that country. I was born there, lived there in my early years as a member of my extended family, and my deeper sense of belonging would have naturally gone to Eritrea.

So what was the incident that changed my perspective about my nationality? It was in the middle of the first lockdown in the UK when I received a telephone call from my local council, the Charnwood Council of Leicester. The caller was a lady who in her gentle voice asked if I live alone and if I would need support. She explained the kind of support they had available such as volunteers who speak to lonely people. I did tell her about the circle of family members and friends that I have but she mentioned of one particular volunteer who she said is a knowledgeable and a well-travelled person. and, that he is very good with elderly people like me. Well, I thought there was no harm talking to someone so I accepted the offer. The next day I received a call from the volunteer, Michael Charlesworth, who greeted me warmly and spoke about his travel experiences etc. etc. We indeed had a pleasant chat and I liked the invisible

person on the other side of the call. Volunteer Michael called me every week without fail for the duration of the first lockdown. Michael's act of humanity really touched me and I learned that Michael had two or three other lonely souls that he also chatted with.

There was other support too that my caring local council arranged for me. A local charity, John Storer, based in the town of nearby Loughborough town was offering food delivery during the lock-down and I was put on their list. John Storer had delivery volunteers working for them and a package of food was delivered to my door every week. It was a time when I was really worried about the killer coronavirus and the food delivery did indeed save me from making frequent trips to do my shopping. Again, this gesture of humanity touched me and I could not thank enough all those involved – Charnwood Council and the charity John Storer and its volunteers. The food package that I was getting was delivered by a young person, about 17/18 years old, and I became emotional thinking how I wished my own children of the same age could do that.

It seemed to me that the lockdown had brought out the good side of humanity. Not long before the lockdown, the country had passed through a very divisive and ugly national election. In the period that I have lived in the country, that was the worst election that I had witnessed in terms of bitter divisions among the political parties and even among their followers. Amazingly, it seemed as if the lockdown had wiped out the divisions that existed during the election.

Another incident that touched me greatly was when I received a letter from the Prime Minister of the country, Mr. Boris Johnson, at the height of the pandemic. The Prime Minister's letter was to update me on the steps that the government was taking to combat coronavirus and, given my health condition, he advised me that I must stay at home. He further offered some valuable suggestions should I require to go out.

More recently too, I received a letter signed by two high ranking government officials. Mr Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Mr Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who advised that I make sure my GP has my contact details so that I can be contacted quickly in the event that government guidance changes in the future. And their letter further advised:

*“Shielding advice is being paused nationally from 31 March. From 1 April you are no longer advised to shield; but you **must** continue to follow the rules in place for everyone under the current national restrictions”.*

My lamenting about all this is because it contrasts so starkly with Eritrea, my country of origin, which is ruled by a dictator who has been able to remain in power for 30 years by applying brute force against anyone who opposes him. Eritrea is usually and rightly referred to as the North Korea of Africa. The country is at the bottom of all comparative economic and human development rankings in the world. Eritreans are fierce nationalists and after independence in 1991 many from the diaspora actually went back to contribute to the development of their country. I too decided to take part and, at first, I was given a government position in the National Planning Unit of the Department of Economics. The department was chaotic and

unproductive, and I found it difficult to function in a system with so much red-tape. It was a frustrating experience and I had to resign after two years of service.

However, my involvement with Eritrea was not to stop there. In 1998 a bloody war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia which caused the displacement of one third of the entire Eritrean population. By and large, my life experience was with humanitarian work and I felt a sense of duty to go back to Eritrea and contribute what I could to relief of the humanitarian disaster that arose. I had to pass through a lot of bureaucratic procedures but eventually managed to establish a local NGO, Haben. The need for humanitarian work could not have been any starker and Haben just grew and grew, supporting in the improvement of livelihoods of thousands of poverty-stricken Eritreans. Unfortunately, it is not in the nature of dictators to see progress and suddenly all NGOs were asked to close by a government proclamation. By that proclamation, Haben had to close and everything it had, assets and cash, was confiscated by the dictatorial regime. At the time of closure, Haben was supporting about a quarter of a million beneficiaries across the country and no doubt many would have faced serious difficulties by the sudden loss of support. The entire staff of 85 and I also lost our jobs and its impact on our livelihoods was dire.

Having lost my means of livelihood in Eritrea in the most brutal manner, I had to leave my country and seek employment elsewhere. Coincidentally, there was a job opportunity in Kenya with an International NGO for which I applied and was accepted. Having worked for six years in Kenya, I retired and came back to the UK and now live in Syston. Leicester, which is under the Charnwood Council that has looked after me so well during the lockdown.

As I said at the beginning, the lockdown has given me moments for reflection. Inevitably, I thought of and compared my experiences in Eritrea and in the UK. My conclusion of where my loyalty would fall were Eritrea and the UK to go to war is now clear; I would just abstain and not take any side. I love my second country too and I will forever be grateful to it for saving my life from coronavirus.

Finally, I should mention the gain I made from the lockdown. Michael Charlesworth, the humanitarian volunteer who chatted and checked my sanity during that time has become my valued friend. When at one stage the lockdown had eased, Michael came twice to visit me and met part of my family. I trust and sincerely believe that Michael and I will remain good friends for the rest of our lives.

NB: I wrote this piece to share with my children with the hope that they will ever remain to be good, humanitarian and loyal citizens of the UK. But I also hope that my Eritrean compatriots will also learn a thing or two from my experience. Primarily, I hope they will appreciate that belonging to a country, being a national of a country, is not all about holding a passport for the convenience of travelling.

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