



Reform candidate Matt Goodwin thinks the Britishness is an identity but Englishness is an ethnicity. His need to make a distinction is what matters. Alamy/James Speakman

## Matt Goodwin’s ‘English ethnicity’ rhetoric: it’s important to ask why politicians want to sort people into categories

Published: February 12, 2026 12:19pm EST

**Ros Williams**

Senior Lecturer in Digital Media and Society, University of Sheffield

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.hdgn4ya5k>

<https://theconversation.com/matt-goodwins-english-ethnicity-rhetoric-its-important-to-ask-why-politicians-want-to-sort-people-into-categories-275200>

For Reform parliamentary candidate and former academic Matt Goodwin: “Englishness is an ethnicity that is deeply rooted in a people that can trace their roots back over generations.” By contrast, he argues, liberal progressives believe “anybody can be English as long as they sign a piece of paper and identify with Englishness.”

This is not a novel definition, and for some, it may be completely uncontroversial. It’s not surprising that some people living in England can trace their ancestors back many generations.

But attempting to define a particular “ethnicity” is also an attempt to determine who is (and who is not) part of a given group. Policing these boundaries has serious consequences.

### The idea of essential groups

To speak of an identity as one that can be traced “back over generations”, is to speak of human reproduction and generational transmission. These are central ideas in how, historically, people have been categorised into racial groups.

The biological sciences have a long history of dividing humans up. Take 18th-century Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus's Systema Naturae, the most influential attempt to classify the natural world, and the basis of contemporary zoological nomenclature. Linnaeus subdivided humans into four varieties that many of us would balk at today and has no basis in modern science: white Europeans, reddish Americans, tawny Asians, and blackish Africans.

In the centuries since, the number of groups has changed, as well as the language used to describe them. But the idea that we can inherit some innate qualities via generational inheritance – essentialism – underwrites these influential ideas. Essentialism would have it that you're born as part of a group and all the "identifying" in the world cannot change that.

These divisions can also generate a sense of entitlement to certain rights or resources for one group over another. They have been used to justify violence, discrimination – some of the most shameful moments in human history. Indeed, racial essentialism became so dangerous that Unesco published a series of statements to flag the dangers of the impulse to divide ourselves like this.

### **The limits of categories**

The world is in a constant state of push and pull. People move or are moved, for all kinds of reasons all the time. They settle and reproduce in different places. This is an empirical truth that limits the utility of essentialist ideas.

Essentialist thinking requires us to say both where, and when, we are from. Some will find it quite straightforward to demonstrate membership of a particular group but others will not. Many of us won't be able to say that all of our ancestors (as far back as history allows us to trace) were all born in England.



Dame Kelly Holmes was part of Gove's discussion with Goodwin. Alamy

Take Dame Kelly Holmes. She was one of the public figures Spectator editor [Michael Gove](#) mentioned when he interviewed Goodwin on this and other subjects. He asked: "Would you say that [she is] not really English?"

Holmes is mixed race (a term that also leans on the idea of essential categories that somehow merge). She served in the army, won gold medals for England and Great Britain and received the honorific of Dame. But if only some of her "roots" can be traced "back over generations", then does she not qualify as English?

Many of us will confound the groups that we are made to squeeze into because, ultimately, our roots long predate contemporary ideas of nation, identity and group.

### **Why do people invoke these ideas?**

For me, what's important here is not disproving the essential existence of groups, but trying to trace why they are being mobilised. Why do politicians want to define these categories?

Groups, identities and communities are made and remade. We come to feel a part of a collective. And this feeling is generated often in ways that seem somehow naturally occurring. We pray at the same place of worship; we listen to the same kinds of music. But our affiliations to particular groups do not exist in the wild.



Michael Gove interviews Matt Goodwin.

Categories have social power. When you define a collective, it makes it possible to speak to that collective and to mobilise it. Collectives can be delineated in more and less definitive ways. Essentialist thinking is some of the most definitive and inflexible of all. At its worst, those outside a group are denied access to respect and safety.

So, why distinguish between those who belong and those who do not? Why debate whether public figures with ancestors born elsewhere, but born and raised in England, are “actually” English? Why evoke (but not invoke) essentialised ideas of race, using words like ethnicity?

And if we know that cultivating boundaries of belonging can generate a sense of entitlement, then who risks being denied access, and to what? In a period of economic difficulty when public resources are already stretched, what is the next logical step after enough people can be made to agree on a clear definition of who is or is not English?

The essentialist claims we are hearing in the UK are not new, but they are powerful. So when politicians like Goodwin assert a desire to open a public debate on the categories they have selected – and even defined – we have to ask what purpose it serves.