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Brexit has its roots in the British Empire – so how do we explain it to the young?

The EU referendum is the last throes of Empire working its way out of our systems.

BY SALLY TOMLINSON AND DANNY DORLING

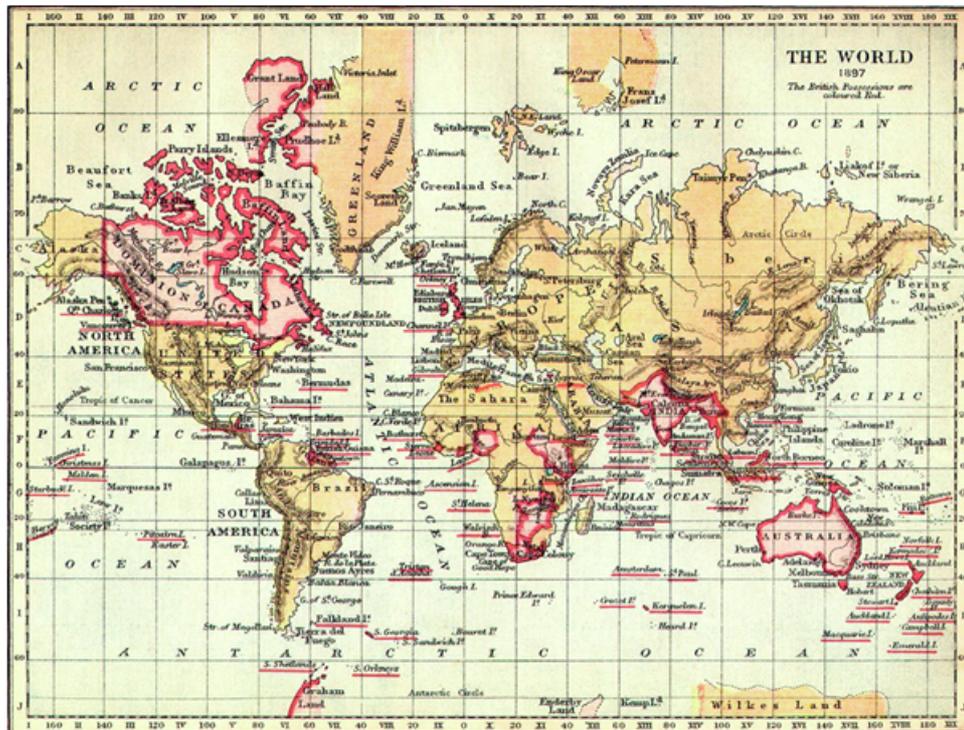
Is Brexit a marvellous opportunity to renew our imperial contacts? On the one hand we have UKIP, who tell us that “Outside the EU the world is our oyster, and the Commonwealth the pearl within”. Boris Johnson has been

falling off his bike with enthusiasm for world trade outside the EU. On the other hand we have David Cameron banging on about 40 per cent of our trade being with the EU and the difficulty of doing deals with the rest of the world. What should we tell the children?

Of the over 100 former colonies, protectorates or dominions once ruled by Britain (depending on how you count them) 52 eventually transformed into the Commonwealth, although 31 are not that significant for trade. They still have populations of less than 1.2 million. Persuading former colonial countries to sign trade deals might be difficult. The Trans-Pacific Partnership recently sealed between the USA, Japan and ten other Pacific Rim countries included five Commonwealth countries. Canada has already done a deal with the EU. The UK would have to negotiate separate trade deals with its larger former colonies, if they were agreeable.

Perhaps the Brexiters, if there are no specific agreements with the EU, will rely on negotiating trade agreements just like all other members of the World Trade Organisation. Or perhaps they are relying on recreating the Empire Marketing Board, which worked to support British Trade in

the 1920s. The Board produced 72 reports over ten years, extolling imperial trade. Included in these were “A book of Empire Dinners”, “A Calender of Fruits and Vegetables from the Empire”, and “Why Every woman should buy British”. A recipe included with this last missive described how to make the King’s Empire Christmas Pudding, to be cooked entirely out of Empire ingredients. Perhaps they could also suggest that we resurrect the Professorial Chair in Imperial Economic Relations at the LSE, funded by the Empire Marketing Board?



“PINK BITS 1897”, SOURCED FROM

[HTTP://WWW.BRITISHEMPIRE.CO.UK/MAPROOM/PINKBITS1897.HTM](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/pinkbits1897.htm)

Apart from those students who fancy decolonising education, and toppling statues in Oxford, and returning golden cockerels from Cambridge to Nigeria, the majority of people under 50 only have a hazy idea of what the Empire and Commonwealth were all about. In trying to explain this all to students we could start with the map of the world which hung on classroom walls in England until the 1960s. Generations of pupils were taught that the bits coloured pink 'belonged to Britain'. It has taken us a long time to adjust to our loss. One little girl told researcher Rob Jeffcoate in 1979, "once we owned the whole world, but now we've only got a little piece. I think there are too many coloureds in our country,". A thirteen year old boy told Lord Swann's Committee on "Education for All" in 1985 that the "The foreigners take our homes, our jobs, our food, and even our women".

From Bermuda being claimed following a British shipwreck in 1609 (now a tax haven) through to our reluctantly handing over Hong Kong to the Chinese in 1997 (tears were shed) all the countries of the empire were variously conquered , taken over or handed over to the mighty British Empire by corrupt local elites. Our empire's high

point was around 1897: some still see that time as being when Britain was at its best.

To understand those who wish for Brexit we have to carefully explain how their great grandparents, grandparents and parents, benefited from what was in effect the plunder of a quarter of the world by one country. Perhaps those who wish to leave think a return to such riches is again possible? Most UK students know little of the empire their grandparenst were born in. We have to explain that from the 1950s, when the ungrateful natives began to demand their own countries back, the British government actually invited a lot of those natives to come over to the 'Mother country' and work at the nasty jobs the British didn't want; and we also need to contend with years of anti-immigrant propaganda .

In 1169 Ireland was the first country conquered and colonised as part of the nascent Empire. Its population were subsequently used as very cheap labour in England, especially after the famine. After Brexit would there have to be barriers and passports needed to travel into Ireland or would be it easier if the North of Ireland were to rejoin the rest of Ireland?

To understand Brexit we have to revisit the geography textbook in use in schools up to the 1960s which told school children, including some recent migrants from former colonial countries, that “under the guidance of Europeans, Africa is steadily being opened up... doctors and scientists are working to improve the health of the Africans, missionaries and teachers are educating the people... the Europeans have brought civilisation to the Africans to the peoples of Africa, ...whose standards of living have been raised by their contact with white people” (Stembridge. 1956:347). However, we would then need to balance this with the views of the descendants of the ten thousand or so Kenyans killed during the 1950s uprising against Colonial rule.

We could even go back to the public schools of the nineteenth century, which nurtured the rulers of Empire. As the *Contemporary Review Journal* told the public schools in 1899, that as “British rule of every race brought within its sphere, has the incalculable benefit of just law, tolerant trade and considerate government” it was the duty of the British to provide competent rulers. The Headmaster of Harrow School agreed, telling the Royal

Colonial Institute in 1895 that “the boys of today are the statesmen, generals and administrators of the future... in their hands is the future of the British Empire”. Upper and upper middle class boys at public schools were encouraged to believe in an ideal of selfless imperial service, a sense of racial superiority and imperial chauvinism. This was nurtured by the development of Social Darwinism and claims of a genetic white British superiority over non-white races. As one historian of Empire, T.O. Lloyd, put it “by the 1860s British opinion simply regarded the Empire’s black and brown subjects as natural inferiors”. Perhaps some of those leading the campaign to exit the EU still hold such beliefs? What does explain their ardent belief that we would be so much better off if we were completely in charge of ourselves (and others) again?



UK BORDER FORCE PATROL VESSEL IN LESVOS, APRIL 2016.

It is not just the more expensively educated of those who wish the UK to plough its own way in the world again who may have been taught that the British are somehow naturally superior and don't need to cooperate. The values underpinning the public school curriculum percolated down to the middle class grammar schools and the elementary schools of the working classes. As one elderly respondent to research published by historian Stephen Humphrey's in 1981 commented "Froggies, Eyties, Dagoes, ...the only way we'd describe them was that they was all beneath you".

Through the more jingoistic elements in the school curriculum, juvenile literature and later films of books (such as Tarzan, the Jungle Book), the lower classes were encouraged to believe in their economic, political, social and racial superiority to the rest of the subjects of empire. The domestic underclass could become the imperial over class and all British classes could unite in a national patriotic superiority. The strength of this solidarity is still present in the 21st century and goes some way to explaining the xenophobia, racism and hostility that is still such an obvious part of the British heritage.



A BOY IN MOIRA REFUGE CAMP, LESVOS, MARCH 2016.

CREDIT: PHIL JONES

So how can the current generation of school and university students, and the rest of us born after overt colonisation understand the Empire, global issues, in or out of the EU and much else? Statutory guidance for the study of history still demands that students should know the history of our islands as a chronological narrative, and also: “how Britain has influenced the wider world” – it is something of a whitewash in the Key Stages and the GCSE curriculum. When he was Education Secretary in 2013, Michael Gove was forced to backtrack on his original ideas for the national history curriculum, but what he did manage to change of it is still controversial, and says a lot about the man and his beliefs. Of course, he is also a leading light among those campaigning to leave the EU.

Historian Deana Heath has noted that our national history curriculum now manages to avoid tackling the actual impact of empire on either the colonised people or the colonisers. As Simon Schama put it, much of our teaching is still “1066 but without the jokes”.

It is a matter for debate as to who will want to trade freely with us English, if we decide to go it alone. Perhaps the

Brexit referendum is the last death throes of Empire working its way out of our systems. From one canal to another, from the Suez crisis of 1956 through to the Panama Papers 60 years later, the stories of our lives in Britain have largely been a story of just how hard some of us find it to adjust to no longer being top dog.

Chris Patten and his daughters in Hong Kong, 1997



Source: Image appearing frequently on the web, eg.:<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/0e/2d/36/0e2d36886a92cafdd97917b3add4a7c7.jpg>

Sally Tomlinson is honorary research fellow at Oxford University's Department of Education. Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of Geography at Oxford University. He is giving a lecture entitled 'Should We Stay or Should We Go' at the London School of Economics tomorrow.