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## **Beware of Kipling-spouting politicians: Britain's imperial mindset is undermining its chances of Brexit trade success**

The world isn't a plum pudding anymore. It's time for Britain to stop pretending it can carve it up—and scrap its imperialist approach to post-Brexit trade

by Danny Dorling, Sally Tomlinson / October 9, 2017 /

In October 2017, Joris Luyendijk made a heart felt plea to the English [in the pages of this magazine](#):

“Why would you allow a handful of billionaires to poison your national conversation with disinformation—either directly through the tabloids they own, or indirectly, by using those newspapers

to intimidate the public broadcaster? Why would you allow them to use their papers to build up and co-opt politicians peddling those lies? Why would you let them get away with this stuff about ‘foreign judges’ and the need to ‘take back control’ when Britain’s own public opinion is routinely manipulated by five or six unaccountable rich white men, themselves either foreigners or foreign-domiciled?”

To try to answer Joris is difficult, but we are both English academics who have looked at the changing social geography of the country and how the English have been taught a particular version of their history. A huge problem is that many among us have still not yet accepted that our place in the world is not at the very top.

Had Joris been writing a few days earlier he might also have asked about why the British Ambassador had to tell his near namesake, Boris, to shut up when he was about to [say something extremely offensive at a temple in Myanmar](#). It was, apparently, because Boris didn’t understand just how offensive it was for him to recite the lyrics of a Rudyard Kipling poem about a British soldier kissing a Burmese girl. Worse still, there is the possibility Boris did understand how offensive he was being, but did it deliberately to court favour among a certain camp at home.



The Plumb-pudding in danger – or – State Epicures taking un Petit Souper by Gillray.  
Picture: [British Library](#)

Boris’ tone-deaf stunt is unfortunately indicative of a wider issue. Almost two centuries ago, sometime around 1818, James Gillray drew a cartoon of William Pitt and Napoleon Bonaparte desperately attempting to carve up the world, which appears as a plum pudding. These days, the carving is done by trade deal rather than sword. So where have we got to with those brilliant trade deals planned with the rest of the world after Brexit?

In September 2017, with less than eighteen months to go before the leaving bell tolls, the EU’s chief negotiator (Michel Barnier) told the world that the UK’s approach to leaving the Union was “nostalgic, unrealistic and undermined by a lack of trust.” Two

weeks later, Prime Minister May suggested adding another two years before Brexit, prolonging the uncertainty and lack of clarity on trade deals; and not helping display any further signs of trust.

May was partly reacting to Foreign Secretary Johnson's Telegraph article in which he suggested that, after leaving the EU, the UK "will be able to get on and do free trade deals ... not least with the fastest growing Commonwealth economies, and build a truly global Britain."

Possibly the interior of the Foreign Office has gone to Johnson's head—no other ministry is decorated with so many murals, presumably designed to impress visiting dignitaries with the splendour of British Imperial rule. Or, perhaps, he is motivated by nostalgia for what he had been taught were the good old days of Empire and Commonwealth, when countries were persuaded or coerced into trading with the "mother country."

But with the Prime Minister running round the world begging for trade deals with Canada—which has just signed a deal with the EU—or with India, which might still have rather negative memories of domination by the old East India Company, some humility is required. Within hours of her speech in Florence the credit rating agency Moody's [downgraded the UK's financial trustworthiness again](#).

## **An empire state of mind**

The high days of Empire were not about trade deals but were achieved through domination. The main point of controlling an Empire was, after all, to loot countries of their raw materials, food and labour.

All those merchants, financiers and industrialists who dominated trade from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not exactly playing fair. Slavery was introduced into the Caribbean to grow and process the sugar that initially rotted the teeth of the aristocrats and traders. Writing on India in 2015 William Dalrymple concluded that for all the power wielded today by Exxon Mobil, Wal-Mart or Google, they were tame beasts compared with the militarised East India Company.

Back then, foreign competition was curtailed by force. Perhaps Johnson sees himself as a latter day Oliver Cromwell, who pushed out European competition in colonial trade, with Acts in 1651, 1660 and 1661 decreeing that all goods, slaves, food and manufactures were only to be carried in English ships and putting tariffs on foreign sugar arriving in England.

In 1911, Kipling and his co-author Fletcher produced a History of England, which included a poem by the former. This ditty splendidly linked trade with the superior British merchant and

fighting navy. Starting off “Oh where are you going to, all you Big Steamers, with England’s own coal up and down the salt seas?” the poem went on to describe the food brought into the mother country from the Empire. To ram the point home:

For the bread that you eat and the biscuits you nibble

The sweets that you suck and the joints that you carve

They are brought to you daily by all us Big Steamers

And if anyone hinders our coming you’ll starve.

Imperial Free Trade was actually protectionism and involved literally fighting off competitors, especially as other (all much smaller) European Empires wanted some of the action. But by the 1920s notions of free trade were abandoned and “imperial preference” was in. The plethora of organisations devoted to extolling colonial trade, and urging people to buy goods from the Empire (which later formally became a Commonwealth of remaining and former colonies in 1949) was at its height.

In 1924 an Empire Exhibition in London was established, aimed to show off imperial goods. It attracted millions of visitors. Of particular interest was a life-size statue of the Prince of Wales made out of Canadian butter. There was no need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century agonising over whether we ought to topple statues of

men celebrated for violence, conquest and racism: it melted.

Universities also colluded in the celebration of Empire and colonial trade. A Rhodes Chair of Imperial History was set up in 1919 at the University of London, to celebrate the old rogue who had looted South Africa and “Rhodesia.” Professor Halford MacKinder, one of the founders of the London School of Economics, set up a School of Geography in Oxford in 1899 and developed a series of Empire lectures for teachers in the 1920s. The Empire Marketing Board endowed a Chair in Imperial Economic Relations at the LSE.

It all began to fall apart in the Second World War and afterwards, when Britain depended on the USA to keep the food coming. There was a sharp decline in the UK economy as, one after another after another, the Imperial colonies celebrated their independence and enjoyed a global liberalisation of trade. We blamed trade unions at home for our woes in the 1970s, but they were actually down to our loss of bullyboy status worldwide. Yet neither May nor Johnson were taught any of the actual story at their various schools and or at university. They were taught a myth.

In the 1970s, when May and Johnston were at school, a standard geography text book—still in —was J. H. Stembridge’s

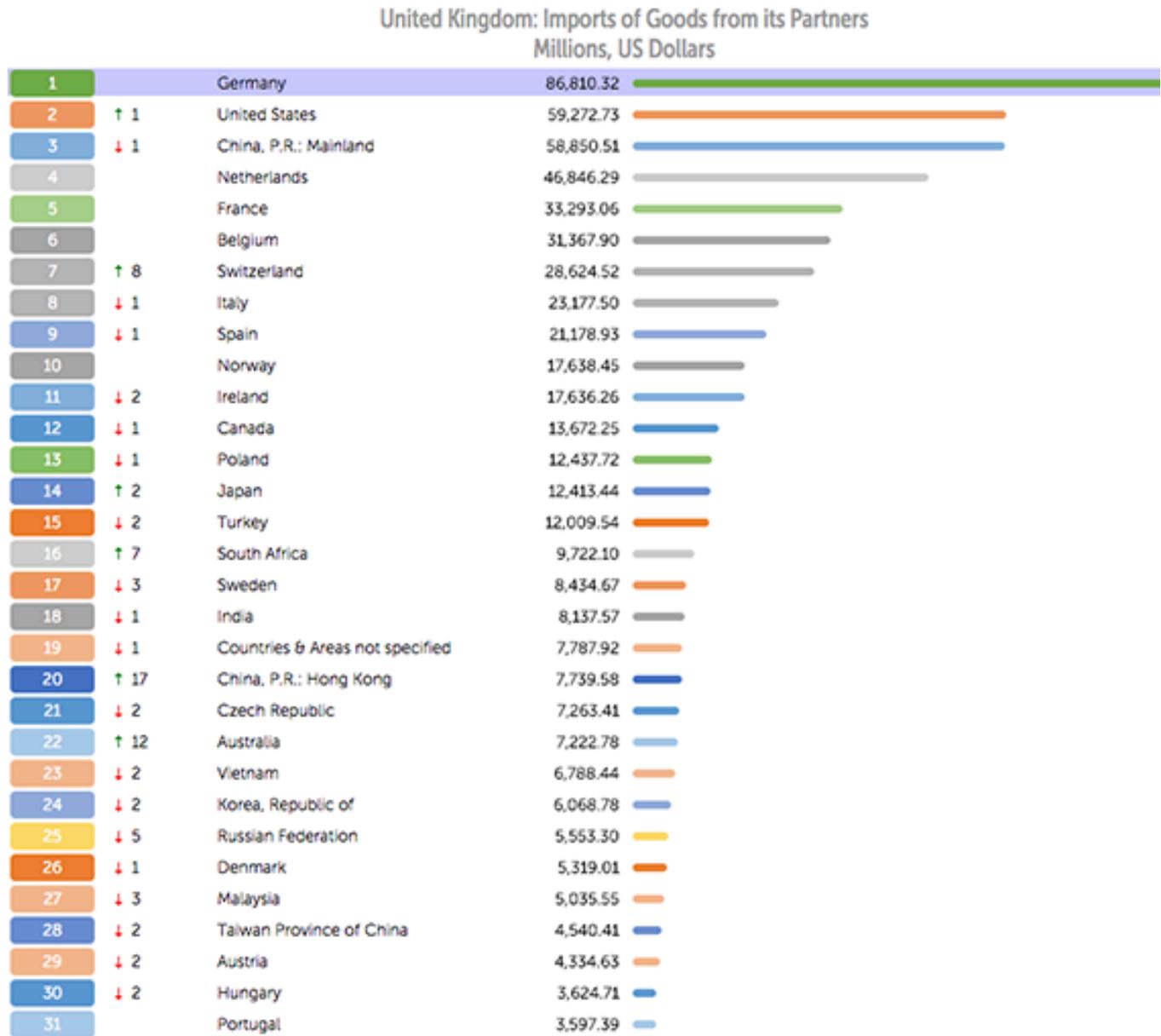
The New World Geographies. On page 10, pupils were told: “Mankind is divided into three primary races, the Caucasian or White Race, the Mongolian or yellow race and the Negro race.” After running through the history and geography of Europe (minus any mention of empires and colonialism), its author hopes that “may these rich historic memories be a happy omen for the future relations of Europe’s nations.”

Xenophobic histories and geographies, and the memorising of Kipling’s poems, was probably not the best education for understanding Britain’s future world trade possibilities in the 21st century.

## **Where trade really happens**

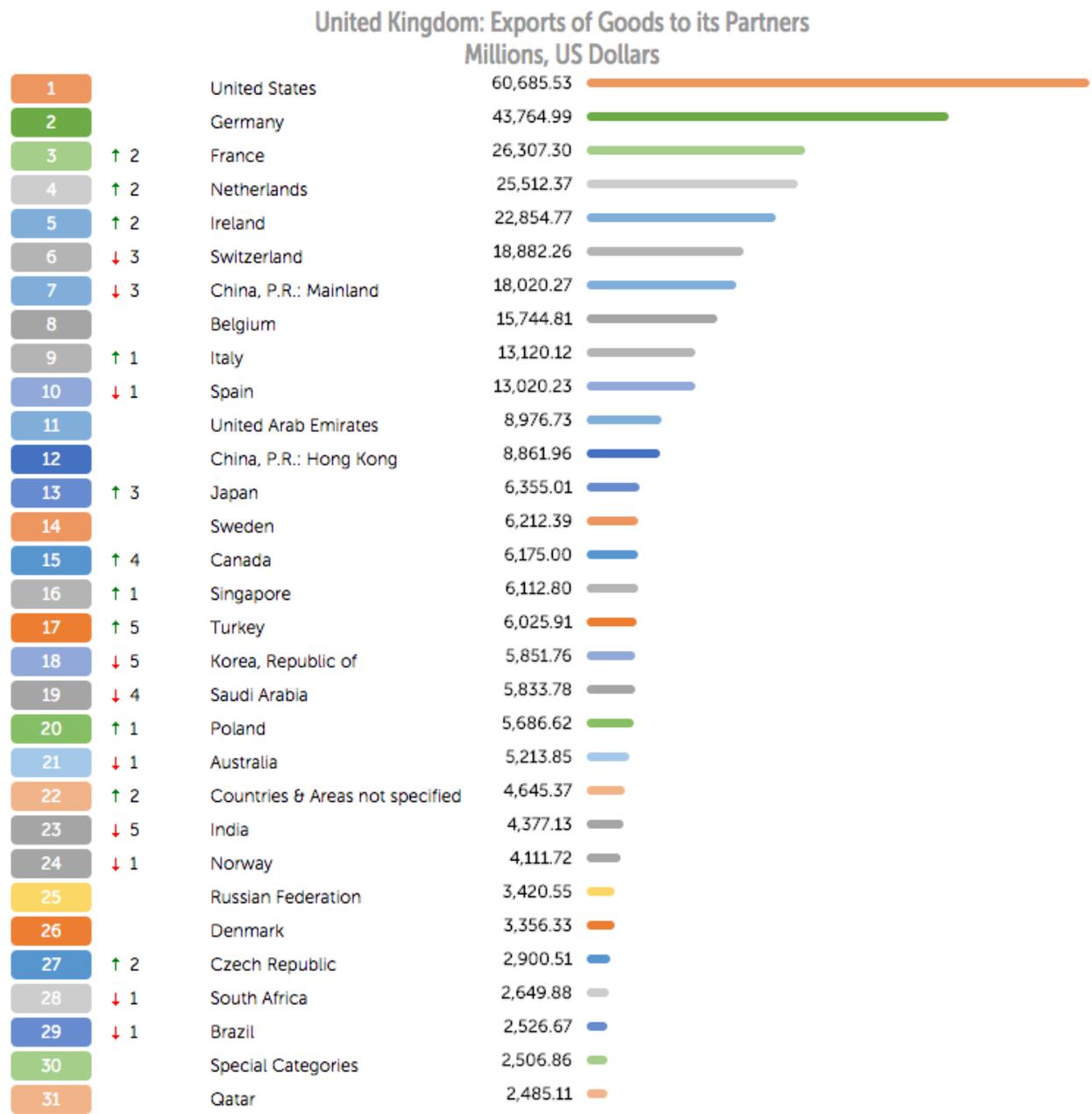
It is not just nostalgia that has got us in trouble. One major problem is enormous ignorance as to from where we currently get most of our imports. The graph below shows the latest data. India is 18<sup>th</sup> most important and falling in importance. Similarly Australia is ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> and Malaysia ranks 27<sup>th</sup>. For the UK, the country that produces more of what we need than any other is Germany, then the USA, then China, and then a series of other EU and European free trading block nations beginning with the Netherlands and ending with Poland.

# Imports in millions of US Dollars



2016 data showing ranking change from 2015. Source: <https://data.world/imf/direction-of-trade-statistics-dots> and <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>

## Exports in millions of US dollars



2016 data showing ranking change from 2015. Source: <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>

It is the facts that get in the way of plans for Empire 2.0. The very latest data (in the table above) shows that in 2015 India was the UK's 18th largest export market; by 2016, that ranking had dropped to 23rd. In a year's time we will know if that fall continued throughout 2017. All this is despite the pound falling in value.

The table above shows the greatest destination of exports from the UK is to the USA, but to the USA we exported six billion dollars worth fewer goods in value in 2016 as compared to 2015. It also shows that, in total, the UK exports far more to European countries than to the USA, then to China, then the UAE and then we export more to Poland, and even "countries and areas not elsewhere specified" than to India! The UK currently exports 10 times as much by value to Germany than India.

Brexit will not result in Empire 2.0, but Empire 0.0.

Brexit, whatever it eventually comes to mean, will be about Britain learning how small a country it really is; how unimportant a trade partner it really is compared to the vastly inflated imagined greatness. When you see Theresa May looking broken and Boris Johnston a fool, you are seeing how Britain looks to the rest of the world.

## **Where that leaves us**

So where does this leave Boris Johnson, the Brexiteers, the Prime Minister and the future of UK trade deals? Since the EU takes 44 per cent of UK exports as compared to 9.5 per cent of Commonwealth exports, and the Indian Tata Empire has recently (via a merger with a German company) signed another trade deal with the EU; will we really get any Imperial preference back in trade deals? Perhaps they think that selling arms will save us?

All major British political parties still agree that selling arms is a trade that gives the country an economic boost even if the partners and recipients are a bit dubious on the moral and human rights front. In September 2017 Britain's Defence Secretary signed a deal to sell 24 Typhoon jet fighters to Qatar, and BAE Systems announced that it has orders on the books from the Royal Saudi Air Force, the Royal Air Force of Oman, and the Kuwait Air Force. What a grubby and pathetic trade we now excel in.

But what about our food, especially if the Brexit negotiations fall apart—will we go hungry or have to eat badly? With only unstable WTO trade rules to protect our imports, will we be getting chlorinated chicken, phoney corned beef and rotten avocados? Can we make enough from selling arms and

laundering dodgy money through our discredited financial institutions to pay our way in the future that is being planned? Some may call for the come back of those Big Steamers and warships to protect us. But our greatest enemy today is ourselves, our jingoism, our stupidity, our ignorance and our inability to realise that the world is no longer arranged for carving up like a plum pudding.

Joris Luyendijk ended his piece on what he has learnt by living in Britain for the last six years with these words:

“As for the EU, it is first and foremost a rule-based organisation. If the rules around Article 50 were bent to allow Britain back in on special terms, then the whole edifice is undermined. Scotland should be let in if it wants, and Northern Ireland too. But England is out and must be kept out—at least until it has resolved its deep internal problems. Call it nation building.”

No country on earth has carved up so much of the globe and built so many other nations, brought so many into existence, often with the wrong borders in the wrong way and at the wrong time. The ignominy of realising that we now have to turn our scalpels on ourselves and heal the harm caused by so many decades of rising economic inequality and social division is too much for those who believe that Empire will rise again. They may

never be a constructive part of the nation building and soul searching at home that is to come. Joris is correct about the size of the mistake we have collectively made; but he doesn't understand why we made it. We had spent too many years fooling ourselves.

