

Tomlinson, S. and Dorling, D. (2019) (Mis)Rule Britannia: Brexit is the last gasp of empire, LSE Blog, February 20<sup>th</sup>, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/02/20/misrule-britannia-brexit-is-the-last-gasp-of-empire/>

# (Mis)Rule Britannia: Brexit is the last gasp of empire



*Brexit represents the last gasp of the British empire, argue **Sally Tomlinson (Goldsmiths, University of London)** and **Danny Dorling (University of Oxford)**. The men who have led it cannot accept that the colonial era, and the exploited wealth that came with it, is over.*

All imperial countries and their leaders have problems when their empires disappear, and they no longer have the forced tribute or inequitable trade deals they have depended on. Even when previously colonised people come to work for their former masters and build up the 'mother country', they may find a distinct lack of hospitality and even face deportation in their old age. So, as the sad tragedy known as Brexit moves into its assumed final stages, it is time to revisit the British Empire and its ending – Brexit being perhaps the last gasp of this empire.



Picture: Cover of a Seamen's Hospital booklet via [Europeana](#) and the [Wellcome Collection](#) and a [CC BY 4.0 licence](#)

Brexit is a gasp of rancour which seems to have brought to the surface much resentment, hatred, and ill-informed debate. Even Theresa May could not possibly have envisaged a situation where, faced with headlines such as “**Officials warn of putrefying piles of waste after no-deal Brexit**”, and the current UKIP leader writing to the Queen telling her she had committed treason by signing the Maastricht Treaty, she (May, not yet the Queen) is forced to return to the EU in late February, to try to renegotiate that infamous withdrawal treaty that in January Parliament had rejected and the EU had said it would not renegotiate.

May will not be helped by her international trade secretary announcing (to a Conservative think-tank) that EU countries would now be **keen to negotiate** due to weaknesses in their economies. Nor will she be helped by what was quickly labelled as the ‘Malthouse compromise’ on the backstop, after a junior minister (Kit) who claims (in Who’s Who) that his hobbies are baking bread and watching others dance and play.

Only a couple of generations or so ago, Britain was in control. It was in control of more people in an empire larger than any other there had ever been in the history of the world. The disappearance of this empire led inexorably to a loss of control of land, labour, wealth and also to what sustained an imperial identity. Clinging to fantasies of empire, a group of people – led by those mainly educated in schools designed to produce the rulers of empire – are today in the process of creating an era of misrule and mistakes that will have serious consequences for all the people of the four nations that currently make up Britain, those in many connected European countries, and well beyond.

A major consequence of the misrule of Britannia is possibly the further dissolution of the UK (most of Ireland having left the Kingdom a century ago). Polly Toynbee rightly **pointed out** in 2017 that the Irish border was ‘a road block to the fantasies of Brexiteers, reviving deep-dyed contempt for the Irish’ who at that time were dismissing it ‘with an imperial fly-whisk’. Ireland, the first country to be colonised by the English in 1169, was divided in 1922 by a hated border. During the 30-year long Troubles from 1969 to 1999, the British army blockaded country lanes, and the Provisional IRA booby-trapped roads. Could no-deal lead it again into violence, or even into a vote for a United Ireland?

The misplaced nostalgia for a British empire – a time when by force and violence Britain did indeed ‘rule the waves’ for a long period – has been used by the small number of influential people we have documented in our book, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of empire*, who have a dangerously imperialist misconception of the country’s place in the world. These misconceptions often began in childhood. Where else do the ideas of taking back control of a mythical country come from? Once upon a time the ‘Romance of Empire’ book series told children that “England was a gallant little nation whose power and conquests are obviously the

rewards of merit since all her opponents are bigger and uglier than she is”(cited in JS Bratton), and the world map had large pink bits which we were told ‘belonged to us’. The Brexiteer master manipulators used such memories to take control of the opinions of some voters through a campaign notable for lies and misinformation.

Misrule by misinformation was, and is, also notable for fantasies about free trade – either with a Commonwealth (of 53 countries, 31 with fewer than three million people) who have not so far been too enthusiastic about trading with a country which once took their land and labour and protected its own trading position – or with the world’s largest economies, who are embroiled in their own trade disagreements. The imperial days when raw materials and slave or indentured labour overseas created an industrial revolution have long gone, and manufacturing has shrunk to 10% of the UK economy. The British state may be good at making and selling arms, perhaps unusually good at spying and tourism too, but even selling good higher education may be impeded by mean-spirited immigration rules and high fees creating **Giffen goods**.

Across Britain, for over a hundred years, misrule by disinformation has created in many people a particular dislike of almost all foreigners, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Those who voted to take back control of immigration were unlikely to have known about legislation such as the 1905 Aliens Act – designed to keep out East European and Jewish migrants – or the 16 immigration control acts passed since the invited arrival of post-war migrants from former colonies. There has been minimal information about the current immigration bill before Parliament, which aims to control migration by cash. Those earning less than £30,000 are apparently too poor or low-skilled to deserve entry into the country.

Lies and misinformation about immigrants, especially those who arrived after the end of the second world war, reached fever pitch during the referendum campaign. And those lies have recently become shriller and nastier. From the 1960s onwards, people were told that without immigrants there would be more employment for ‘British workers’: more housing, good schools and welfare benefits for the deserving. The truths were seldom reported: poorer immigrants from former colonies took jobs the ‘native’ Britons did not want, they lived mainly in private not public housing in city areas where their labour was needed, and mostly attended schools for the working classes which had never been that good. In fact it was their arrival that made the schools better, especially in London.

Grotesque inequalities in a supposedly rich country have been blamed on anyone or anything other than the inability of the British rich to share a smaller domestic pie, once the last of the colonies was gone.

The 1930s – when the empire was still more or less intact – saw similar inequalities between rich and poor that we see now. It was the disappearance of the empire after the war, when the looting of land and labour diminished, that led to the rich becoming poorer. This was blamed on immigrants, despite their labour and taxes contributing to the country's wealth – and on socialists and trade unions. There was barely a mention of friends in Saudi Arabia and other oil countries raising oil prices, or of how other European countries managed to avoid the growth in inequality that the UK has experienced since 1978.

Peak Inequality, as Danny Dorling's book describes it, may now have been reached. The richest of all work so very hard to avoid paying taxes by sending money to the 14 overseas tax havens that are still British protectorates. A few are even paying for **Ubercopters** to pick up tired skiers and return them to their fondue and wine. The consequences of no longer ruling the lands, the waves or the skies of imperial times will have consequences that are now only slowly becoming apparent. Empires only finally end when the elite children – those that were related to the last emperors, viceroys and colonial governors – are no longer running the shell that remains.

## Reference

Bratton, J. S. (1986) "Of England, home and duty: Images of England in Victorian and Edwardian literature" in (ed) JM MacKenzie: Imperialism and Popular Culture. Manchester. Manchester University Press.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

*Sally Tomlinson and Danny Dorling will discuss Inequality, Brexit and the End of Empire at an event at the LSE on Friday 29 March 2019. [Find out more here.](#)*

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*They are the joint authors of *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of Empire* (2019), Biteback.*

## 5 Comments



1.

**Mrs M V Cheek** February 20, 2019 at 11:36 am - Reply

What a mean article!! Most of the old colonials are dead..There a many wealthy Remain voters who didn't want to rock the boat because the Eu had done well for them. The Leave voters are the,so called left behind people, the ones some articles on this page abuse as stupid, racist and uneduacted . Now it's the dead old colonials. who, according to this piece have risen from the grave who are responsible for the Brexit vote..What I do know about the colonies is that after the 11 World War, a bankrupt UK could hard;ly rebuild itself ,and finally, when joining the EU,abandoned them.altogether. The Empire was both good and bad. The Empire is of a past time.And there was good too. Where would Malasia be now if the Emergency had not been fought and won.It was not much fun living in a China under Chaiman Mao. ..



2.

**John Laband** February 20, 2019 at 4:41 pm - Reply

The leave voters are the ones who have been left behind but that is the responsibility of the Westminster government. Joining the EEC/EU rescued the UK from its economic status as the sick man of Europe. The whole country has benefited from our membership and our guarenteed European market, just as we benefited from the captive markets which the Empire gave us. The appalling statistic remains however that just as the richest region in Northern Europe is London, 9 out of 10 of the poorest regions are in the UK. This inequality, I believe, led to the brexit leave vote fuelled by misinformation from people who fear the rise of a successful united EU.



3.

**Alias** February 20, 2019 at 6:47 pm - Reply

I agree with Mrs MV Cheek. The article constructs a story which is completely unsupported by evidence. I suppose it is true hat Boris Johnson went to a public school, but so did a lot of Remainers (George Osborne and David Cameron for example). If the writers of this article would like to pull their fingers out and get some research done, they could try a statistical analysis of the kind of school Leave and Remain MPs visited. (Perhaps they could build on the interesting research described in this blog post: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/11/14/mps-who-studied-ppe-at-university-are-among-the-most-pro-remain/>)



4.

**Jacob Jonker** February 20, 2019 at 7:22 pm - Reply

A gasp of rancour indeed. The entire Remoaner trip since 24th June 2016 has been a whinge of rancour. Now, about empire. The EU is an empire and the EU elite and its hired pens should be put out to pasture so as to allow a thorough reform to take place and put Europe on a new cooperative footing. We just have to wait a little while for the EU to become an empty shell. But what to do with all the superfluous professors?



5.

**Teejay** February 20, 2019 at 10:48 pm - [Reply](#)  
Thank you for sharing your bigotry with us.