

Dorling, D. and Tomlinson, S.(2019) Brexit: how the end of Britain's empire led to rising inequality that helped Leave to victory, The Conversation, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, <https://theconversation.com/brexit-how-the-end-of-britains-empire-led-to-rising-inequality-that-helped-leave-to-victory-116466>



# Brexit: how the end of Britain's empire led to rising inequality that helped Leave to victory

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## Authors



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It was a man called Reginald Brabazon, Earl of Meath, who in 1903, two years after the death of Queen Victoria, suggested that her birthday, May 24, should be renamed Empire Day and become a day for patriotic celebration. His idea began to take off the following year and slowly spread in popularity. In 1909, Brabazon attended a [day in Preston](#) where a crowd of 20,000 people watched boys and girls parade past in what they were told was the national dress of each colony.

When World War I patriotic fervour was at its height, in 1916, the government gave in to calls for the day to be marked with an official state ceremony. But it wasn't until the 1920s that the official celebrations really began to take off, and in May 1926, Empire Day became closely linked to the work of the newly established [Empire Marketing Board](#). British school children all received a free mug and cake and were routinely taught that the British Empire was glorious. One woman, who grew up [in Cardiff](#) in the late 1950s, remembers being made to sing the following ditty at elementary school as the union jack was hoisted in the playground every Empire Day:

*Brightly, brightly, sun of spring upon this happy day  
Shine upon us as we sing this 24th of May  
Shine upon our brothers too,  
Far across the ocean blue,  
As we raise our song of praise  
On this our glorious Empire Day.*

As the power of the British Empire waned after World War II, it became increasingly clear that Empire Day was done. In 1958, it was finally rebadged British Commonwealth Day, in 1966 merely Commonwealth Day. And in 1977 the date of the celebrations was moved to the second Monday of March [where it remains today](#).

No doubt if Empire Day was still going, 2019 would have been a special year – marking the 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth. Still, long since support began to ebb away for formal celebrations of the British Empire, the echoes of empire have continued to reverberate in British political life. And as we argued in a recent book, [Rule Britannia: From Brexit to the end of Empire](#), these echoes had a strong influence on why some of the 17.4m people who voted to Leave the European Union did so in June 2016.

The collapse of Britain's empire in the decades after World War II was followed by a huge growth and then persistence of extreme economic inequality. Britain's relative economic decline occurred in tandem with the loss of almost all of its remaining colonies in the 1970s and the economic benefit they had provided. The British

thought that joining the European Economic Community in 1973 could replace this loss. It didn't, because the European relationship was mutual, rather than exploitative.

At the same time, within Britain, inequality began to rise. Income inequalities rose from being among the lowest in Europe in the 1970s to being the highest of all 28 European Union member states [by 2015](#), the year before the EU referendum. And the UK's income inequality also saw the [greatest rise](#) during this period between 1976 and 2016.

Great inequality has damaged the lives of the majority of middle-class Conservative and UK Independence Party (UKIP) voters who live in the south of England. It damaged their lives because it hurt so many of their children and grandchildren's [life chances](#). Whereas their generation, when young adults, could more easily secure permanent housing, start a family, hold down a steady job and – if they were to secure a place – attend university for free, it's primarily because of rising inequality that the next generations in England could not.

On top of that, states that tolerate greater economic inequality tend to experience less improvement in health and social services, which matter most as you age. This older group are far from being the poorest in Britain, but they are the large majority of people who voted Leave. They were told that the majority of their woes were caused by immigrants, which [was untrue](#), but has been made all too easy to suggest. They know from their own pasts that something better is possible for them and they especially hope it will be for their grandchildren. And in June 2016, they were offered the chance to “take back control”.

This dynamic – the link between the end of empire and the rise of inequality in Britain – has not yet been given the weight of importance it should have in analysis of the Leave vote. The scale of all the other empires of Europe, even when combined, pale in comparison to the British Empire, and its fall was by far the greatest of all.



Boris Johnson on the Vote Leave campaign trail in May 2016. Stefan Rousseau/PA Archive

## Why the UK voted to Leave

Approaching three years after the referendum, no actual arrangements on leaving the EU have been agreed in parliament. The March 29, 2019 deadline came and went, with an extension to October 31. After months of disagreement, stalemate remains at Westminster.

There is still disagreement about who voted to leave the EU and why. Many accounts persist in suggesting that what swung the vote was disaffected working-class electors in the north of England, despite the majority of Leave votes coming from the south of England, from the middle classes and from people who normally vote Conservative or UKIP. What became clear by March 29 was how much the UK had descended into political disorder. Quarrelling, self-interested politicians, many of them demonstrably ignorant about their state's imperial past, and fantasising about the future, were arguing about what sort of Brexit would suit their preferences and ambitions.

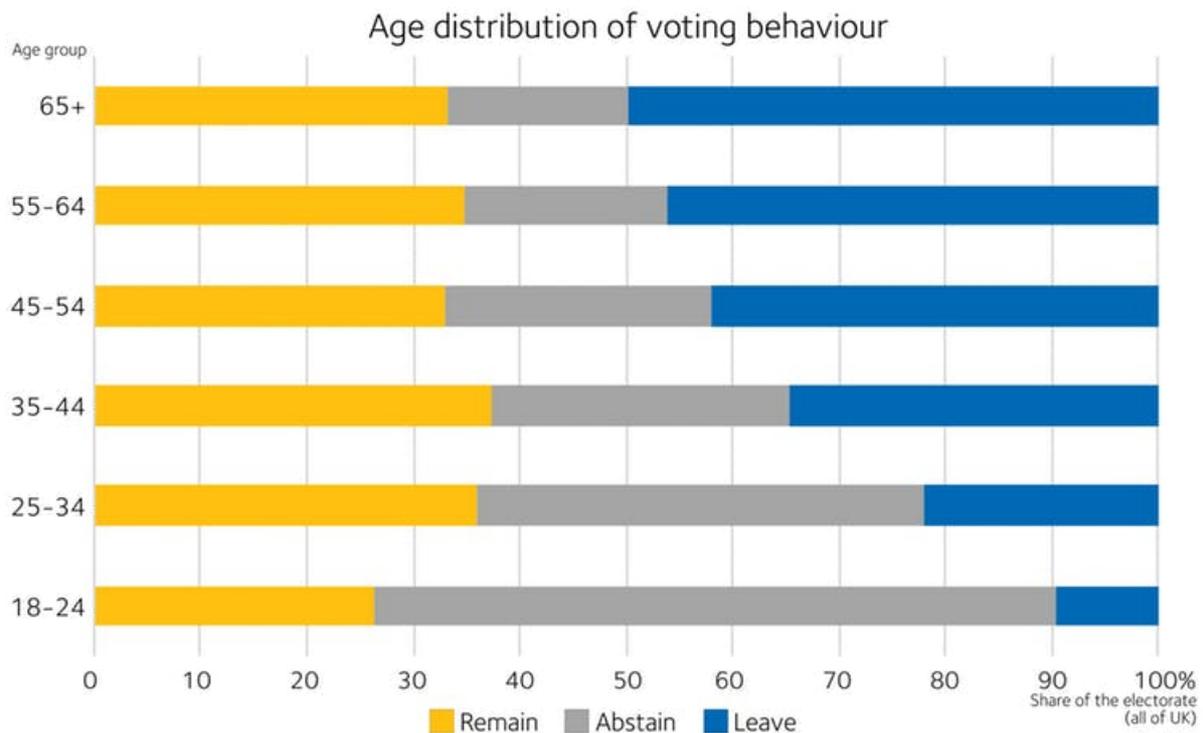
Some have claimed that the vote to Leave was the language of the unheard, a patriotic pro-sovereignty, anti-immigrant, anti-elitist movement. However, as Guardian journalist Anne Perkins recently noted, it was led by “millionaire, public school-educated financial traders, fronted by an Old Etonian [Boris]” in a “war room” organised by an Oxford-educated man – Dominic Cummings – who led the Vote Leave campaign.

Analysis of the largest referendum exit poll by the pollster Michael Ashcroft revealed that 59% of Leave voters were middle class. So was it the work of the poshest, the middle, or the poor? Who tapped into whose memories, dreams and prejudices most effectively to secure a Leave majority, and why?

In the aftermath of the referendum result, almost every political party and campaign group wants to claim that its view on what should happen next represents the real “will of the people”. They often especially wish to co-opt the support of the downtrodden working class and unheard majority in the north of England to their cause. Yet, Leave voters were marginally more likely to live in the south of England, and three-fifths were middle class. Still, those who voted Leave did have one clear trait in common: they were mostly older, English voters, many of whom are likely to remember Empire Day.

## **What’s been lost**

Age was the most important factor in the Brexit decision, with a majority of those over 45 voting to leave, rising to more than 60% of those aged over 65. Incidentally, people aged over 90 – old enough to clearly remember World War II – tended to be very pro-Remain, but their numbers are now inevitably small.



### Voting by age group in 2016 referendum.

[Benjamin Hennig using analysis of Lord Ashcroft exit poll.](#)

This older generation lived through the era of [full male employment](#) between 1945 and 1976, and the greatest rises in standards of living for all [up until 1976](#) – and they then watched as this was lost between 1976 and 1986. This feeling of loss continues today. As the former Labour minister, Alan Milburn, explained in his December 2017 [letter of resignation](#) as chair of the government’s Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission:

*Whole communities and parts of Britain are being left behind economically and hollowed out socially. The growing sense that we have become an us and them society is deeply corrosive of our cohesion as a nation.*

Empire rhetoric and thinking was used to deflect the anger of the majority towards others – others always painted as inferior to them, especially migrants. As Philip Murphy, director of the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, [argued in 2018](#):

“Euro-sceptics, currently in the ascendant are implicitly rehabilitating the racialised, early 20th-century notion of the Commonwealth as a cosy and exclusive Anglo-Saxon club.” Those who had taken the most, who had grown rich from empire while the majority of the population of Britain saw their living standards stagnate, often did so on the back of a little “family money” from the past.

It is now time to fully recognise that as the opportunities of empire faded, a small group of those with a little financial advantage at home, began instead to exploit their fellow British citizens for more and more profit. The take of shareholders in British companies began to rise and the wages of British workers didn't keep pace.

Unlike in the US, where real median wages were virtually static at this time, median wages did rise in real terms in Britain in the 80s and 90s, but they didn't keep up with shareholder dividends. Wages at the top also rose far faster than those at the bottom. This was the story of the 1980s and 1990s.

Tactics of divide and rule, and breaking dissent that had been applied overseas to different groups in different ways were now aimed at British trade unions, British activists and agitators, and British politicians who argued for greater equality. Divisions rose, poverty spread and unemployment was called a price worth paying in the 1990s.

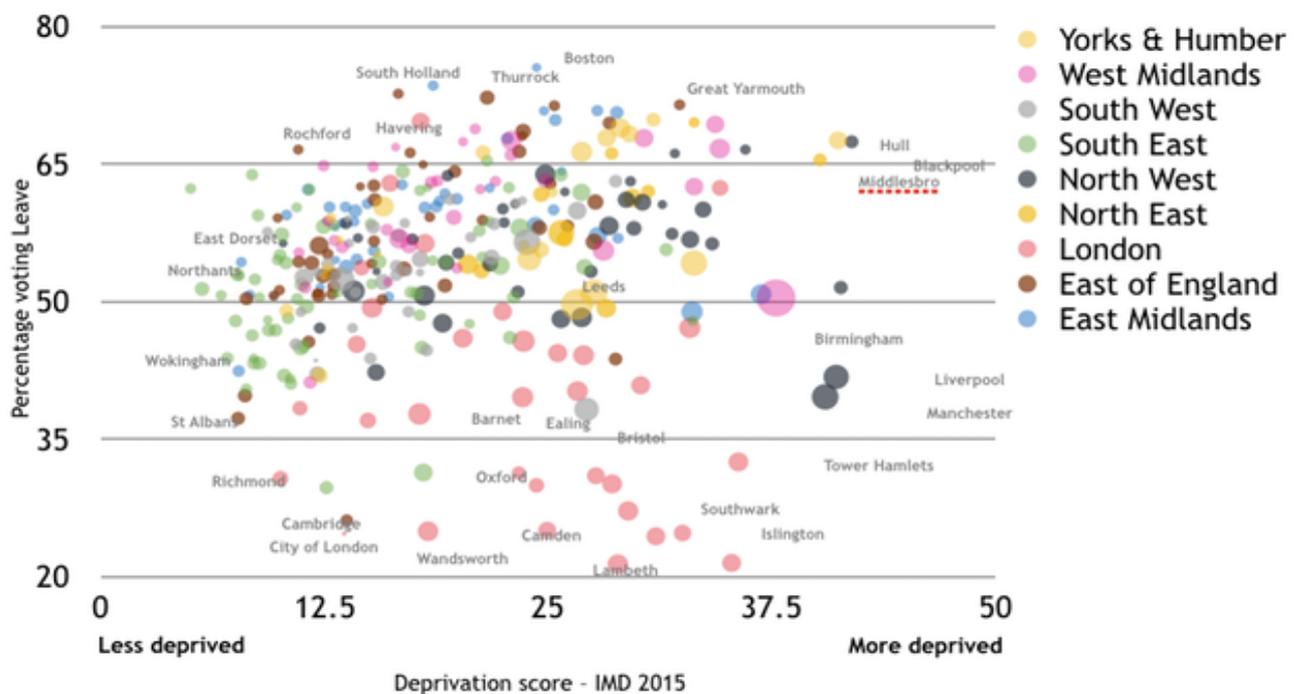
Fast forward to 2014 and falling national life expectancy in the UK has been treated as mere collateral damage. The countries of the UK cannot afford a decent health service, their people were told, because too much money was being sent to Brussels. And again, they needed to “take back control”.

The politics of austerity, introduced in 2010, have led directly to the proliferation of urgently needed food banks and the cuts in social and health services which also contributed to rising infant mortality in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Nowhere else in Europe were more babies dying each year as infant mortality rates rose. The worst effects of inequality and austerity were felt in the north and by the poor.

Despite this suffering, it wasn't poverty and deprivation in northern areas that caused people to vote to leave the EU. Our own careful study of the geography of the vote included in our recent book, coupled with polling evidence, makes clear that it

was older, less well-off Conservative voters in both the north and south who swung the vote, and there were far more of these in the south of England where they also turned out to vote in the referendum at a higher rate. This is why the greatest absolute numbers of Leave voters were in the south of England.

Overall, [52% of people](#) voting Leave in all of the UK lived in the southern half of England – home to a minority of the UK electorate – and a majority of these Leave voters were in the middle classes. At a local authority district level, there was essentially no correlation between voting Leave and deprivation, which shows that the driving force behind the vote to Leave was not being left behind other areas.



***Vote Leave and deprivation by local authority in England, 2016.***

*Each area is a local authority, drawn in proportion to its population and positioned according to how deprived it is and the proportion voting Leave.*

[Alasdair Rae, 2016. What can explain Brexit?](#)

## Back in control

In 2012, the broadcaster Jeremy Paxman [suggested](#) that even when the colonial administrator and his home counties wife had long given up their gin sundowners on the veranda, the native British had been cushioned from reality because the empire gave a comforting illusion about their place in the world and “a stupid sense they were born to rule”.

Added into this mix, the “take back control” slogan employed by Leave campaigners was a very powerful message. It harks back to when the British actually had a lot of control. Older people, the grandparents of today, “knew” without thinking about it that up to 1947 Britain was in control of some 700m people in an empire stretching around the world and [most of them](#) thought that this was a “good thing”.

Yet questions about whether the empire was good or bad miss the point that it was largely because of the loss of such a huge empire, and the loss of the expropriation of its wealth and labour power, that economic inequality in Britain has risen so rapidly.

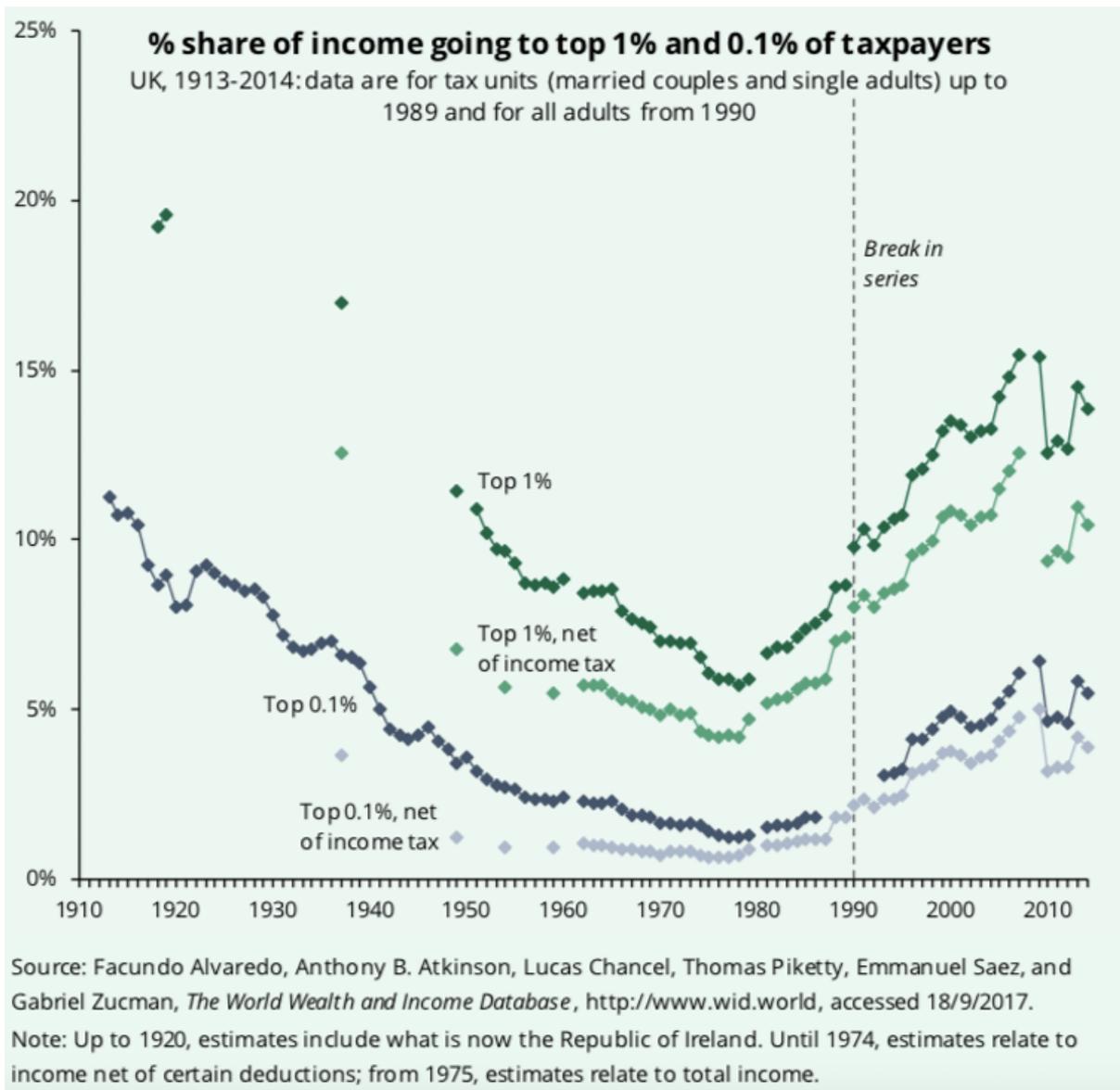
Britain’s industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the claim to be the workshop of the world, was fuelled by raw materials dependent on slave and indentured labour overseas. It was built around the concept of “free trade” that opened up foreign markets for Britain under the watchful eye of the gunboat and ensured global economic control in case others tried to muscle in on that free trade.

The British grip gradually disappeared during the 20th century, the pound relentlessly fell against the dollar across that century, and many of [the British wealthy](#) blamed the labour movement and eventually the EU for their diminished status in the world. They rarely saw their family riches as unfairly won in the first place.

The loss of India in 1947 and most African colonies in the 1960s had effects that were felt most keenly decades later. It wasn’t long after the colonial investments of the wealthy [first turned sour](#) that Conservative governments in the early 1980s began to cut taxes for the wealthy at home and [pulled the plug](#) on poorer regions. This plug

was pulled in many ways, from ending the regional funding of poorer areas that had begun with the [Special Areas Act of 1934](#), through to state support of industries and infrastructure in the south-east of England and especially London.

The rich British [became poorer](#) when the empire disappeared. The evidence is clear to see [in graphs](#) that track the falling take of the top 1%, 0.1% and 0.01% of UK taxpayers.



### The fortunes of the UK's wealthiest.

The fall in the fortunes of the very wealthiest had actually begun earlier, after the end of World War I. As the author Evelyn Waugh wrote in [Brideshead Revisited](#), of the fictional Marchmain and Flyte families: “Well they are rich in the way people are who just let their money sit quiet. Everyone of that sort is poorer than they were in 1914.”

In 1913, [the richest 0.01%](#) of households in the UK received 425 times the average household income per year. By 1976 that had fallen to just 30 times. But by 2014 it had risen to 125 times. Figures for very recent years are yet to be released by the government.

In 2018, the inequality gap between the richest and poorest in Britain, by income was at a post-World War II peak. The best-paid 10% of households were each on average receiving [almost three times](#) as much per year as the median household. Yet inequality has still not regained its 1913, pre-war peak. It is a long way from that and to get there would require a remarkable further dislocation of British society.

## **Increasing xenophobia**

The British public have been distracted from this rise in inequality and absolute poverty by suggestions that immigration was, and continues to be, the main cause of their many problems. Newspaper owners, some immigrant themselves, encouraged the vilification of immigrants, with the UK prime minister, Theresa May, repeatedly claiming that [if immigration was reduced](#) to the “tens of thousands” then all would be well. In the ten weeks before the Brexit vote, more than [1,400 articles](#) in the popular press mentioned immigration.

The patriotic songs sung annually at the last night of the proms in London are part of a myth-making of the nation. Rule Britannia may claim that Britain “never never never” shall be slaves, but the story the song tells overlooks the realities that Britons were slaves to the Romans, Vikings, Danes, and [Normans](#), and that the royal family is descended from the French, the Dutch and the Germans.



## **The Proms: a night of patriotic pageantry.**

Guy Bell/PA Archive

As they invaded countries around the world in imperial expansion, the British saw themselves as traders, lawmakers, administrators, missionaries – but never as immigrants. It has taken a long time for the British to adjust to their loss of territories and imperial subjects, and many have never adjusted to the entry of others into the UK, even if imperial subjects were also encouraged to regard it as their “mother country”.

Until the later part of the 19th century, rich or aspirant foreigners were tolerated, such as German mill owner Frederick Engels and his author friend Karl Marx, and also the young Michael Marks and his friend Thomas Spencer [who opened a market stall](#) in Leeds. But in 1893, a magazine – ironically called “Truth” – described immigrants and foreigners as: “Deceitful, effeminate, irreligious, immoral, unclean and unwholesome.” Such comments were rare at the time but became more and more common as scapegoating migrants for the harm caused by rising poverty and inequality in Britain grew in popularity.

The Daily Express and many other newspapers began to print increasingly xenophobic material from the turn of the 20th century. It was then unthinkable that [those regarded as](#) “black and brown inferiors” would come to Britain to settle. At first, in an uncanny echo of today, it was Eastern Europeans who were most feared. The [1905 Aliens Act](#) gave the home secretary responsibility for immigration and nationality. It was mainly designed to prevent Jewish immigration, and was supported by an organisation called the British Brothers League which aimed to: “Stop Britain being a dumping ground for the scum of Europe.”

All this goes to show that neither anti-immigrant and anti-European sentiment, nor legislation to control immigration, is new to Britain. Some 14 immigration control acts and other controls were passed in the later 20th and early 21st century, making nonsense of claims that only after Brexit can the country “take back control” of its borders. The obsession with control has been going on for decades, a further [immigration control bill](#) is currently before the British parliament and the Home Office is planning an “immigration status” database, a development that has [been met with alarm](#) by human rights groups.

The events surrounding the Brexit vote also resulted in a huge surge in [hostility](#) towards racial and ethnic minority groups, migrant workers, and [refugees](#). This hostility is a continuation of past ideologies: race and empire have shaped the concept of British national citizenship, and thinking as to who should be included or excluded.

## **Taught to feel superior**

Older people – who were the driving force behind the Leave vote – have had much more experience of a more overt ethnocentric, jingoistic school curriculum. The high point of empire, from the late 1880s onwards, coincided with the development of mass elementary education. A value system, based on military patriotism, xenophobia, racism and a nationalism that excluded foreigners, [filtered down](#) from the upper-class public schools to the middle-class grammar schools and into the elementary schools for the working classes.

Those young men who ran the empire had to feel effortlessly superior to the populations they were sent abroad to govern. The working classes had to be helped to feel superior. To [one boy brought up](#) in a Salford slum in the early 20th century:

“School was a blackened gaunt building, made exciting by learning that there seemed to be five oceans and five continents, most of which seemed to belong to us.”

The working class were encouraged to ignore their poverty in the belief that they were superior to the natives overseas. The 1880s to the 1930s was a time when vast areas of Asia and Africa were being invaded and taken over by the British, and a range of invented imperial traditions were developing. A passion for classification of supposed classes and races on biological and eugenic lines was developing alongside stereotypes of the ignorant and deficient working classes, similar to those tropes of superiority over the stupid and lazy natives overseas.

Into the 1960s, maps on classroom walls had large areas coloured pink, which illustrated the colonies belonging to “us”, and into the 20th century, school text books, juvenile literature, and films extolled the adventures of those imperial adventurers who had made Britain Great. As the historian John Bratton [noted](#):

*England was presented as a gallant little nation, whose power and conquests are the rewards of merit, since all opponents are bigger and uglier than she is.*

Part of the importance of understanding imperial education, and its modern day significance, is that many of the most senior Conservative party politicians were educated in private schools in decades when unreconstructed imperialism was still a part of the curriculum. A textbook still in use in Sussex schools in the 70s described the races of mankind as the Caucasian or white race, the Mongoloid or yellow race and the Negro race.

The British school system continues to produce young people who, upon becoming university students in 2017, felt it appropriate to [chant outside](#) a black student’s room at Nottingham Trent University “we hate the blacks” and “sign the Brexit papers”. There are [many other contemporary examples](#) of racist behaviour by university students in Britain today, which has its roots in the days of empire. What matters is to understand the environment that helped and continues to help such ignorance to grow.

## Sinking in

The Brexit campaign was a useful diversion from growing economic inequality in Britain and the lack of any plan to address this great injustice. But the realities of leaving the EU are beginning to sink in. What meagre economic growth occurred before the referendum and post 2008 has been lost. Wages [have not kept up](#) with inflation – they have only outstripped inflation for brief periods and only for a few months at a time.

There is now growing inequality in the UK's already terribly divided school education system as a result of cuts to state school funding – a real terms cut since 2015 of [£5.4 billion](#). The health service is struggling as real costs far outstrip any funding increases, and a housing crisis led to a [threefold to tenfold rise](#) in the numbers of people sleeping on the streets between 2010 and 2018. The latest official figures suggest the number of people sleeping rough in England [fell by 74](#) between 2017 and 2018. The huge real increase resulted in a [rise in numbers](#) found dead.

More people are at work in the UK, as the population has increased. More women, older, and disabled people have been encouraged or coerced to work, but the jobs are low paid and exploitative. The [most recent data](#) from the Office for National Statistics shows that pay growth is slowing and that incomes of the poorest fifth are down by 1.6%. Meanwhile, the incomes of the richest fifth [rose by 4.7%](#) in the 2018 financial year.

Income inequality is [rising](#), and [wealth inequality](#) is staggering. Child poverty was reported – on BBC children's TV – as having become the [new normal](#) in many parts of Britain.

Amid all this, and in an effort to put a positive spin on post-Brexit Britain, in September 2018, Theresa May [announced plans](#) for a Festival of Britain to begin in 2022. The prime minister said that the festival would aim to “showcase what makes our country great”. And it was reported that this new festival would cost an [estimated £120m](#) to prepare. In April 2019, the think tank British Future [pointed out](#) that “holding a Festival of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2022, on the centenary of Ireland's partition and civil war, would be the worst possible timing”.

No Festival of Brexit will compensate for the rise in inequality across the UK. But the country could use such an event to help teach people something they really need to remember from their past. Children were once told at school that the reason the British were so rich was because its people were special. That was not the truth. They were so rich because they sat at the heart of the largest empire the world has ever known and benefited hugely economically from that.

Being a member of the EU was not the cause of the UK's woes, neither was immigration. If the British really want to take back control they will need to reassess their more recent history. Knowledge is power.

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Sally Tomlinson is the author of: **Education and Race from Empire to Brexit**

*[Education and Race from Empire to Brexit.](#)*

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#### **Disclosure statement**

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Sally Tomlinson is a member of the Labour Party.

Danny Dorling does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond his academic appointment.

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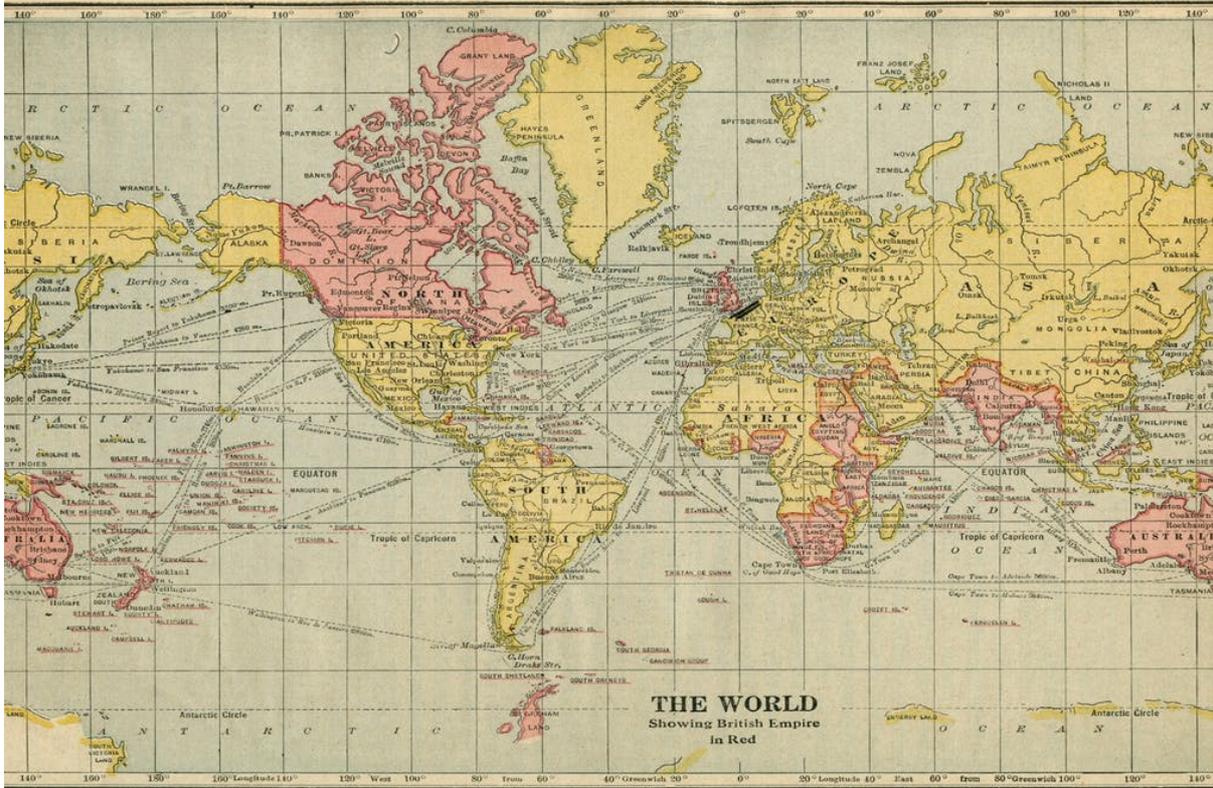
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**David Jenkins**

The idea that the decline of the Empire is the cause of inequality doesnt hold up. Inequality was at its highest at the time when the Empire was at its peak, around the end of the 19th century.

As the empire declined, and the two world wars destroyed much of the capital owned by the elites inequality also declined - the decline of the empire resulted in the golden period between the war and the 70's when inequality was low, university was free, and getting a permanent, full time job was easy. This was when everyone could pay off their mortgage on a single average income.

The along came the stagflation of the 70's, the oil crisis, the destruction of the unions and Thatcher. Deregulation and privatisation, and the massive growth of the finance sector. Despite being wealthier as a whole, and having a larger economy, growing inequality has meant that most of the good stuff have been siphoned off to a small group of people yet again.

**5 days ago**

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**Patrick Newman**

Patrick Newman is a Friend of The Conversation

In reply to [David Jenkins](#)

That about sums it up. The Seventies were a tipping point represented but not created by Regan and Thatcher. The BBC's retrospective on Thatcher I find it almost impossible to watch as it reminds me of the trauma caused to millions of citizens through no fault of their own. Currently the small and unexpected majority in favour of Brexit following the referendum is a reflection of an inappropriate reaction to Neo-liberalism.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [David Jenkins](#)

Dear David, Inequalities fell in all rich countries from 1910 through to the 1970s, those that took part in the war and those that didn't. Where the rich countries of the world differ is in how inequalities

changed after the 1970s. Within Europe it was only within the UK that inequalities rose to the greatest height. The question is why was the UK different to anywhere else in Europe.

I realise this is a new argument for you to take it. It really is worth trying to take it in before reverting to what you thought were the reasons. When new arguments are first made, the common instant reaction is often to say 'that doesn't hold up' which can mean 'that doesn't hold up with what I have come to believe the story is and I find it hard to see things differently because I have seen things in one particular way for such a long time'. More about book that this articles I based on is available here:

<http://www.dannydorling.org/books/rulebritannia/>

All best wishes.

Danny

**5 days ago**

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**Peter Clareburt**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

The EU arrangements from the 70's onwards contributed to the rise in inequality in the UK as with the reduction in border protections of people and industry, traditional UK manufacturing industries that were networked across the country changed towards services industries that were more centered in the cities. This was the purpose of the EU to harmonize opportunity with free movement of people and money, but it implied a change and sure enough there was a change, but the problem was that the people who won new jobs and wealth were not the same people who lost jobs and wealth. Relatively services is a more efficient industry in converting work to wealth and coupled with concentration in cities led to this significant growth in inequality. Don't forget that GDP is an average, so a rise in GDP doesn't necessarily reduce inequality in fact it may well have an opposite effect in some cases.

This of course is also associated with global growth - particularly in Asia which manufacturing offshoring globally but for a raft of reasons starting in that time period there were a number of factors that initiated and continued change.

There was a bit of a reprieve in the 80s with some car manufacturing based on a tariff issue/opportunity with Japan and the EU, but even that is now on its way out due to the new FTA with Japan having removed those tariff barriers plus significant projected technology changes.

In general they have been significant changes and enhancements in communications travel and transport and technology leading to massive changes in the world order and associated constructs, so to try link this to the death of an empire is really quite an extreme cherry picked argument discounting to many real arguments.

**5 days ago**

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**Sally Tomlinson**

Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London and Honorary Fellow, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [David Jenkins](#)

Dear david Thank you for your comment. I think your reading of what happened is similar to ours, especially the ‘good stuff’ being taken by a small group of people! It is important that the high point of empire at the end of the 19th century coincided with the development of elementary education for the working classes. Imperialism was inevitably built into schooling and the public schools were educating those who went out to run empire. Thanks and best wishes Sally Tomlinson

**5 days ago**

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**David Morley**

In reply to [David Jenkins](#)

You appear to be drawing on Piketty here - and I confess I find it more convincing than the article.

Mark Blyth is good on why wages have not kept track with productivity.

The UK may be an extreme case in comparison to the rest of Europe. But the pattern is similar.

**5 days ago**

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6. [Recommend](#)



**David Jenkins**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

Thanks for taking the time to reply Prof Dorling. Much of what you say in this article I agree with, just not your idea that rising inequality since the mid 70's is the result of the fall of the British empire. You assert this in your article and now rely on your authority to try to convince me you are correct. Not very convincing. You assume I am simply struggling to accept your hypothesis because it is unfamiliar and new, that is a big, and incorrect, assumption to make. Maybe you would improve if you developed your ideas more fully ;)

If you were correct that the decline of the empire is the cause of rising inequality, then inequality would have been rising during the 1945-1975 period, and it was not. Did the empire decline even further from 1975 onwards? No, it was already well and truly gone. All the change since that time is the result of the policies and economics exemplified by Thatcher and the current UK government

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**Carl St. James**

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In reply to [Peter Clareburt](#)

GDP remains a terrible barometer of success. If we chopped down every tree in the country and sold all the wood, GDP would rise which on paper would indicate Britain was doing ok. But we'd have no more trees, and quality of life would suffer.

**4 days ago**

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**Peter Clareburt**

In reply to [Carl St. James](#)

I agree GDP is a terrible measure - why I mentioned it is many people use it as a major decision statistic almost to the exclusion of all others, which is so wrong. e.g. BoE, Treasury and so on.

**4 days ago**

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**Hilary Easton**

Hilary Easton is a Friend of The Conversation

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Sally Tomlinson](#)

Very interesting article, my first thoughts are similar to some others': namely that the period immediately after the war was almost a 'golden age' when it comes to relative equality and, it was under the EU's watch, not the empire's that inequality returned to 1920's levels.

Perhaps the nostalgia Remainers are determined to say fuels the Leave vote, is not for the empire, but for a time when society felt cohesive, social mobility and equality were on the rise, and the welfare state and the NHS felt secure.

As often as it is said that mass immigration does not hold down wages and create a shortage of resources, as much as that may be in fact true, it makes no logical sense when you look at the common sense view of supply and demand.

Born in 1952, I am a little tired of the continual drip of this idea that it was 'mainly' old people who voted Leave, which you can see from your own charts is not the case, unless you count 45 years as old. It appears then, somehow, always to follow that their votes were driven by nostalgia and wanting to 'turn the clock back' to some imagined time of glory for the UK.

I assure you that I don't remember Empire Day and when I was at school the empire was painted as a blood-soaked, national embarrassment, not a glorious achievement. Perhaps it was different at public school. It seemed like a time long ago in history, not something to be celebrated in any way. The glory of Britain was to do with The Beatles and Mary Quant.

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**Neil Foxlee**

In reply to [Hilary Easton](#)

Hilary, you say that "it was under the EU's watch, not the empire's that inequality returned to 1920's levels". This implies that the EU was somehow responsible for the rise in inequality (which began

around 1980, when the Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher were in power). If this is what you believe, could you explain why?

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**Hilary Easton**

Hilary Easton is a Friend of The Conversation

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Neil Foxlee](#)

I don't think that the EU was actually responsibly for the rise in inequality. To me, saying it happened 'on their watch' means they did not in any way prevent it. However, clearly the EU is up to its neck in neoliberalism and promoted austerity as an answer to excessive debt, for instance in Greece. Leftie remainers seem to have forgotten that.

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**Neil Foxlee**

In reply to [Hilary Easton](#)

If the EU had intervened to prevent the rise in inequality in the UK (which is what the article was talking about, not Greece), wouldn't it have been an unwarranted and undemocratic interference in our affairs, undermining our sovereignty?

You say that the EU is "up to its neck in neoliberalism" (which you seem to associate in another comment with globalisation), but aren't the leading Brexiteers themselves neoliberals, arguing for "free" markets and a "global Britain"? And didn't Cameron and Osborne promote austerity as an answer to excessive debt, without any help from the EU?

(And no, I haven't forgotten about the EU's - mainly Germany and France's - treatment of Greece, which was about protecting their own banks, which had made reckless loans to Greece in the justified belief that they would be bailed out if the loans went bad.)

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**Andrew Luscombe**

logged in via Google

The chart showing inequality measures from 1910 to 2010 has the same shape as similar charts for any English speaking country over the period, and many other countries also. The US, Canada, and Australia did not loose empires during this period. The whole premise of the article is unfounded.

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**Peter Johnson**

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Andrew Luscombe](#)

Agree entirely.... pseudo intellect at work in this article...no more than journalistic based opinion with no basis in fact.

How does this type of essay get onto this site?

Very disappointing

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**Paul Burns**

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Peter Johnson](#)

How do broad counter claims like Peter's without any attempt to argue the facts pass themselves off as comments worthy of appearing in The Conversation?

And Andrew dismissed the whole article on the basis of one observation.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, [University of Oxford](#)

In reply to [Andrew Luscombe](#)

Dear Andrew, Inequalities fell in all rich countries from 1910 through to the 1970s, those that took part in the war and those that didn't. Where the rich countries of the world differ is in how inequalities changed after the 1970s. Within Europe it was only within the UK that inequalities rose to the greatest height. The question is why was the UK different to anywhere else in Europe.

I realise this is a new argument for you to take it. It really is worth trying to take it in before reverting to what you thought were the reasons. When new arguments are first made, the common instant reaction is often to say 'that doesn't hold up' which can mean 'that doesn't hold up with what I have come to believe the story is and I find it hard to see things differently because I have seen things in one particular way for such a long time'. More about book that this articles I based on is available [here](#):

<http://www.dannydorling.org/books/rulebritannia/>

All best wishes,

Danny

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Peter Johnson](#)

'Disappointing' is an interesting word. Elsewhere I have written about how often it is used by people on the right of British politics. Peter, don't worry, I am not disappointed in you. But if you would be interested in seeing a huge number of facts backing up these claims further, then more about book that this article I based on is available here:

<http://www.dannydorling.org/books/rulebritannia/>

All best wishes,

Danny

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Paul Burns](#)

Hi Paul, yes their comment do themselves make a point about the people who make the comments. I suspect many readers can see that. Increasingly negative comments like this are useful in helping to explain why the British find it so hard to understand themselves. Thank you for writing.

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**trevor c**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

My assertion is that the 'fact's that you refer to have at best been cherry picked in an attempt to try and support a probably previously held notion by the author. Others have already stated here that

events since the so called fall of the empire were already in train and if the author was correct then we would have seen his theory emerging decades ago.

At worst he is plain wrong.....

as i said a woeful article and often those with these almost religiously held beliefs - faith if you like in their position - 'I have a faith and a view and i need to go and find something , anything to help me try and support it.

Hardly a scientific approach which I had hoped to have seen more of

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**Geoffrey Watson**

Can the anyone explain how the two statements :

“Leave voters were marginally more likely to live in the south of England.”

and

“Overall, 52% of people voting Leave in all of the UK lived in the southern half of England – home to a minority of the UK electorate”

can be reconciled? I think it might depend on whether you count the 3.7 mill voters (60% Remain) from London or not, or it might just be how you interpret “marginal”, but I can’t work it out.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Geoffrey Watson](#)

The terms ‘marginally more’ and 52% are referring to exactly the same quantity. Marginally more here means “2% above 50%”. So the margin being referred to is 2%. I agree we could have been clearer. Some 52% of all leave voters live in the south of England (including all those in London). You can use many different definitions of what the South of England is and come to the same conclusion. You can draw a straight horizontal line just above Birmingham, or you can use the traditional Severn to the Wash or Humber lines (which put Birmingham in the North). It makes no difference. And then, depending on exactly how you draw the line, you will also find that a minority of the UK electorate lived beneath the line, but a majority of the Leave vote was also found beneath the line. The reason why is simply - age & turnout. More older voters live in the south of England and turnout is higher in the south. After that can can then begin to think about how Leave voters normally voted (mainly Conservative or UKIP).

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**Peter Clareburt**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

However this idea of marginal is referring to a single referendum, a view of peoples sentiment at a single point of time. What is most interesting is the relative change between the related referendums.

The first referendum in 1975 include in brackets the term “common market” presumably to give people a better idea of what the EC was and implies to a fair extent that it was recognised they really didn't understand what they were voting for. - people understood the notion of trade and common markets, but I expect had less an idea of what EC meant or strategically what EC could become.

The second referendum however, referred to the EU not the common market and people after living for some time , with the EC turned EU (at a minimum I guess 18 years for people born in the UK), had a much better idea, and therefore the notion of a marginal percentage also needs to be considered in terms of the change in sentiment which was 19% and not a marginal change.

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**Geoffrey Watson**

As one of the oldies born just post war, I think that the discussion of “the end of empire” is a bit black-and-white.

True we had a “pink” map on the wall in Junior school, and were taught to be proud of the our forebears, but we were also taught to be proud of the way we were handing over the colonies reasonably peaceably. Not like the nasty French in Vietnam and Algeria. (There were of course many things that we weren't made aware of.)

The old Liberals had always been a bit luke-warm on imperialism and Labour, were firmly against it. I have never been sure what the true narrative of the Empire should be. Certainly not that of the arch-imperialists, but the current one of some nasty disease called “colonialism” that has gripped whole peoples for centuries does not seem much more realistic.

I must admit that as a young boy I did embrace a sort of military romantic view of the history of empire. But most of the wars that I read about were against other imperialists. The Spanish in the Americas, the French in North America, the Russians, the Germans, the Ottomans and the Indian princes.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, [University of Oxford](#)

In reply to [Geoffrey Watson](#)

This “handing over the colonies reasonably peaceably.” was not the case. It is very upsetting when you look into it, and we did try to destroy a huge number of the documents about it. But I suggest you start with Kenya and work your way round each colony if you want to know the actual story, not what was once taught as the truth: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/17/kenyan-torture-victims-give-evidence>

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**Sally Tomlinson**

Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London and Honorary Fellow, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Geoffrey Watson](#)

Dear Geoffrey

Thanks for your comment. I hope we are starting a conversation on just what the links between British imperialism and our education system have been. The introduction of mass education and the high point of empire went along together and there was little attempt to teach truthfully about the empire and its consequences through the 20th century and to the present day. Please read my book *Education and Race from empire to Brexit* Thanks and best wishes Sally Tomlinson

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**Hilary Easton**

Hilary Easton is a Friend of The Conversation

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

Notwithstanding that some colonies were not handed over peacefully, the point [Geoffrey Watson](#) is making, and I agree, is that that is how it was sold to school children in that era.

In the late fifties and the sixties, when I was at school, children at state schools were NOT taught that the empire was ‘a good thing’ or that the British were born to rule or anything of that sort. Where on earth does this idea come from?

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**Geoffrey Watson**

In reply to [Hilary Easton](#)

Actually I don’t remember much about the empire being taught at school at all. The Dominions had long been independent and India, Burma and Ceylon became so in the 40’s, so when the 50s and 60s

came it was simply a matter of when and how the independence of the rest would be handled. "Empire" was no longer an issue.

OK we weren't taught about the consequences of Empire, but that was becoming history by then. The Cold war was the present (I remember the prefects of our grammar school taking us all out for a protest over the US threat to Cuba). History in any detail came in secondary school, but there were centuries to get through before we reached the empire period, and being in the "science stream" I dropped history before my O-levels, so I never got that far.

[I did grow up in London, which has always been cosmopolitan, and of course voted Remain, so my experiences may not have been typical.]

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**Ian Brinkley**

I am sure there was an element of nostalgia and a yearning for a mythic past in some of the voting on Brexit, but it seems a bit of a stretch to tie the rise in inequality in the 1980s with the final end of the Empire in the 1960s. As others have pointed out, similar trends on inequality can be seen in other countries, notably the United States, and concerns over immigration are hardly confined to the UK.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Ian Brinkley](#)

You are right that the USA saw a similar rise to the UK, even a slightly higher rise. Nowhere else in Europe did. Inequality rose in the USA as it became world dominant, especially after the collapse of the soviet union in 1989. It is interesting to note that inequality also rose within the UK in the nineteenth century as it was approaching its point of maximum military might abroad.

On immigration - contrast the behaviour of Germany to refugees from Syria with the behaviour of the UK.

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**Ian Brinkley**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

I am afraid I couldn't quite follow why the decline of Empire should have driven the rise in inequality in some periods and the rise of Empire (or its equivalent) also drive inequality in other periods and in other countries. The British Empire was indeed the biggest, but France also had an extensive Empire and fought bitter and futile wars to try and hang on to her colonies after WW2 and

yet inequality in France did not increase. Refugees are somewhat different to migrants, and while the German government was commendably open at first, it had to subsequently tighten policy as its stance proved unpopular with conservative voters and has encouraged the rise of the populist and nationalist far right. So I am not sure the differences between the electorates are quite as stark as you suggest.

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**Peter Clareburt**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

Actually percentage wise inequality in other European countries such as Germany and Denmark, and Italy have since 1980 has been greater than the UK - the UK of course started from a higher absolute number so percentages can skew those numbers - but people like to use percentages when it suites their argument so me too. (Germany numbers perhaps influenced by unification to some extent)

But this can be explained by many influencing things we are and have been facing quite rapid change in the last 2 or 3 decades in so many areas, - hence my argument that to try and explain so much with this notion of empire is a very selective argument and needs to ignore so many alternative reasons. - Did it contribute? Possibly more so in a very few much older people.

But there have been so many very significant changes in all facets of life that when you put these all into the mix I believe that the Empire notion is no more than a historical fact. I do understand that the British Empire had significant impact on other places in the world and some of that impact still has consequences today, but it is not not alone there either before during or after the fact.

As to contrasting the current UK position of one current day situation of Syria and Germany, when you are explaining the UK position against a hundred years or more of history is an interesting observation and again rather selective. But over the period between 1960 and now the immigration numbers for Germany and the UK have been somewhat similar in absolute terms, higher for the UK in percentage terms , probably from different sources to some extent. Also the number of foreign born in the UK jumped from 8% to nearly 13% since 2001. That is a significant jump and quite market when viewed on a histogram and I believe there is a valid right for people to be concerned and questioning without having to face down accusations of xenophobia

I apologise for being an interested male, unfortunately I was born that way, but to make up for this did help (in a minor way) to only bring females into the world who are now significant leaders in their own areas, having benefited from their mothers tenacity in all things and their lazy fathers enthusiasm to travel, challenge and continual learning

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**Terry Walsh**

Terry Walsh is a Friend of The Conversation

The %age of income graph above neatly reveals the effects of Thatcherism and the monetarist, selfish '80s, not mentioned in this article, British manufacturing was already in the doldrums, but its decline was hastened and

worsened by her policies. Thatcher's radical conservatism (which should be a contradiction in terms) changed the face and fate of the UK; something of the despair I felt in 1982-83-84 - at the high tide of Thatcherism - I feel today.

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**Florence Leroy**

Clear, logical, enlightening. Many thanks for this article.

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**Danny Dorling**

Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Florence Leroy](#)

Thank you Florence, its also nice to her a views of a woman. Every view above is from a man. I do wonder if anyone has ever done an analyse of who comments most quickly and assertively to articles in the Conversation by gender and by their political viewpoint? Commentators are providing a very useful very large dataset across all Conversation articles. Hope you have a great day, Danny

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**Sally Tomlinson**

Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London and Honorary Fellow, **University of Oxford**

In reply to [Florence Leroy](#)

Dear florence

Can I just add my thanks to Danny for your endorsement and say I too am interested that most comments come from men. Maybe women are too busy, I'm just reading up for the next article on empire and Brexit before doing a bit of cleaning.best wishesSally Tomlinson

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**Florence Leroy**

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

I have also noticed very little comments from women on political and/or historical articles. It could be interesting to see if it is the topics alone. Maybe a bit cliché here but women may be less interested in politics and history than men could be? Do they comment more within the arts or social sciences on this website?

On a personal level, those topics (politics, history) certainly rarely come into my conversations with my female friends! :) Whereas the men in my life love their news and politics! Even at a young age surprisingly enough.

Also Brexit is quite a “hot” topic, with very strong opinions flying around. That might be a deterrent too.

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**Florence Leroy**

In reply to [Sally Tomlinson](#)

And they (women) might be too busy too! :D

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**Hilary Easton**

Hilary Easton is a Friend of The Conversation

logged in via Facebook

In reply to [Danny Dorling](#)

For your information, I am a woman.

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**Michael Wylde**

As a child of the 50s and 60s (born 1953) I’m afraid I don’t recognise much, if any, of this article. I’d never heard of Empire day until I read this article, if we did anything at school for it then it certainly didn’t make any impression. Yes, the classroom wall map had a bunch of pink on it but what it meant wasn’t pushed in any way, the remains of empire were just there, why, how or what it meant wasn’t pushed. My primary education was in the Potteries, a very working class area then (as it still is now).

The 70s followed and one of the main things dragging the UK down was unionism along with inflation. My salary went from £1200 per annum to about £4000 in 3 years - all due to inflation and multiple inflationary pay awards (with help from the steel unions).

I'm also a leave voter now living in the south of England and, sorry, but empire never crossed my mind, nor did inequality. A number of things did, but empire wasn't one of them and there will always be inequality as equality is only a figment of imagination.

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**Steven Huckle**

PhD Researcher in Blockchain Technologies, **University of Sussex**  
Shocking stuff.

It's a scandal you won't hear this angle given air on what has essentially become BREXIT FM - Radio 4. Nor on Auntie Beeb in general. After all, I'm quite sure we all know the truth of the argument made.

Indeed, if anything good is to come out of this BREXIT nonsense, then, as the article states, it must be a general recognition of its Imperialist basis, founded on the slave trade, and the prevailing racist attitudes that guide the upper classes driving the Leave Campaign, whose views trickle down through much of Conservative England. After all, as the article says: "What matters is to understand the environment that helped and continues to help such ignorance to grow".

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**David Morley**

*It is now time to fully recognise that as the opportunities of empire faded, a small group of those with a little financial advantage at home, began instead to exploit their fellow British citizens for more and more profit. The take of shareholders in British companies began to rise and the wages of British workers didn't keep pace.* The question of course is why the shareholders were able to do this. And the answer, surely is that globalisation, immigration, and perhaps the entry of women into the workforce (along with anti union legislation) weakened the power of labour relative to capital.

Maintaining salaries in line with productivity is hard to do if work can be outsourced, or labour imported, with ease.

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**Hilary Easton**

Hilary Easton is a Friend of The Conversation

logged in via Facebook  
In reply to **David Morley**

I agree with your comments, David, and venture that it is disgust with these effects of globalisation, rather than simple nostalgia, that fuels brexit. Unfortunately, globalisation will continue apace after brexit.

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**David Morley**

In reply to [Hilary Easton](#)

One of the things I - and I suspect others - expected from Europe was partial protection from globalisation, or a muting of its effects. Perhaps also a sense of common European heritage, which would lead to a greater sense of identity between the people's of Europe.

What many people feel we have is globalisation, uncontrolled Immigration, elites which ignore what their people want, and a currency which acts like a wrecking ball south of the Rhine. A belief in Europe and its heritage is now considered suspect, tainted with white supremacy, and the only allowable heritage is that of guilt.

On top of that we see a shift to the right in politics which, though I don't buy the rerun of the 30s hypothesis, is still disquieting.

It's just not the Europe we felt we were buying into.

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**Philip Pughe-Morgan**

Danny & Sally, an excellent piece of analysis. I don't necessarily agree with all the points you've made in your article, but it's certainly a very good contribution to the wider debate we need to have as a nation. I'm a historian by background, so have always had a great interest in understanding how we came to be what we are, as a prelude to sorting out how best to face up to our future.

A couple of small personal points first. I was born in 1945 and first attended primary school on the Lancashire Pennines in 1950 among the 'dark satanic mills' etc. I don't have any recollection of either Empire or Commonwealth Day at that time, and we certainly didn't mark it in school. The wall maps showed how much of the world was coloured pink, which of course was a reflection of reality at the time; we did govern these vast territories, either directly as colonies or by proxy through the 'dominions' of the white Anglo-Saxon diaspora.

My second point is that my mother was a Rhodesian, born just before the onset of war in 1914 in Bulawayo, then a small village in the territory of the British South Africa Company (later to become Southern Rhodesia and then Zimbabwe), who married my father during his five year tour of duty as an Anglican priest in the 1930s from the linked diocese of Manchester, and accompanied him back to this country in 1938. So my childhood memories were regaled with exciting stories of adventures on a very real frontier. As far as I can recall, neither of my parents ever exhibited any of the characteristics of what may be termed an 'imperial' frame of mind, in fact quite the contrary.

But I do agree with you that the deeper English consciousness (and it is primarily the English one we're talking about here) has been heavily influenced by the cultural and social effects of empire. Empire in its heyday not only gave the blatant adventurer and the wealthy the opportunity to carve our enormous personal wealth and fame, stemming back to the glory days of licensed piracy during the Elizabethan period, but for lots of young

men who would otherwise have been condemned to a life of urban or rural poverty living at the bottom of the social pile in this country, it offered a gateway to freedom and to a way of life which exalted them above the 'lower orders' of the local native society.

Once the empire evaporated, these folk were restricted again to making their way in this 'sceptred isle,' with all its constraints and social inequalities, and this built up a head of steam which contributed to the general malaise over the direction things were going. Eventually, it was one of the factors which led to the blowing off the head of steam in 2016.

Much has already been written about the strong reaction to prolonged austerity which also contributed to the leave vote, and I'm sure this was a heavy influence on voting patterns. The other main factor, as you have identified, is the inevitable search for a scapegoat when things are going badly wrong, and this was seized on with alacrity by both sides during the referendum with the tsunami of lies poured out over a largely ignorant and undiscerning electorate at that time. Immigration was a convenient excuse, linked also with the undemocratic face of the Brussels bureaucracy, which led to the flood of stories over 'straight bananas' and other fantasies.

Finally, another factor which should not be missed is the enormous and ever-growing power of the media and social media. At one time we lived in isolation and relative ignorance of events beyond our own doorsteps. Nowadays we are swamped with a constant flow of opinion and propaganda, which can persuade us to swallow the most amazing fantasies. This all shores up the wall of hardened opinion which can create tribal conflict and prevent its resolution.

I shall certainly buy your book and explore further on this subject.

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**Sally Tomlinson**

Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London and Honorary Fellow, [University of Oxford](#)

In reply to [Philip Pughe-Morgan](#)

Dear Philip Thanks for your kind comments. As an historian you will know there is limited information on the experiences and lives of families born of marrying in colonial countries who then returned to the UK, it would be great if you could write up your family experiences. Buy our joint book and also my book Education and Race from empire to Brexit for further discussion! Thanks again Sally Tomlinson

[4 days ago](#)

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**Neil Foxlee**

Dear Danny and Sally, many thanks for a wide-ranging, ambitious and thought-provoking article, which clearly reflects your interest in inequality, Empire, the underlying causes of the Brexit vote and the relationship between them. Thanks too for responding to comments. If I might make a few comments of my own:

(1) There seems to be some slippage in your argument - from sequence to co-occurrence to causation - when you write:

The collapse of Britain's empire in the decades after World War II was followed by a huge growth and then persistence of extreme economic inequality. Britain's relative economic decline occurred in tandem with the loss of almost all of its remaining colonies in the 1970s and the economic benefit they had provided. It was largely because of the loss of such a huge empire, and the loss of the expropriation of its wealth and labour power, that economic inequality in Britain has risen so rapidly.

(2) Likewise, I find the chronology of the following confusing, if not inconsistent:

"The loss of India in 1947 and most African colonies in the 1960s had effects that were felt most keenly decades later"

"The rich British became poorer when the empire disappeared [1960s? 1970s?]. The evidence is clear to see in graphs that track the falling take of the top 1%, 0.1% and 0.01% of UK taxpayers" [The graph, however, shows a steady decline in the income of the very wealthiest from just after 1910 to just before 1980, and a sharp rise thereafter until the 2008 financial crisis.]

"The fall in the fortunes of the very wealthiest had actually begun earlier, after the end of World War I."

(3) More generally, there seems to be a confusion between the creation (or in the case of the empire, expropriation) of wealth and its distribution. To put it another way, there is no necessary link between economic decline (however caused) and increasing economic inequality (whether of wealth or income - another important distinction). There may be a link between loss of empire and specific economic inequalities, but this would have to be shown (as you may do in your book). It surely remains the case, however, that rising economic inequality partly or largely reflects domestic politico-economic policy (as you imply when you refer to cuts in social and health services and tax cuts for the wealthy).

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Adam Gilham

logged in via Facebook

Hi Sally & Danny,

I'm interested in your assertion that there isn't a strong/clear link between deprivation and 'leave' voting... a quick look at your chart provided seems to suggest there probably IS a positive relationship between the two if you exclude a few outliers particularly London boroughs (but also other key metropolitan centres)... which are possibly quite different due to ethnic and/or social factors.

In fact the further you get from the centre of London amongst the boroughs, the more you seem to get a reversion to the pattern seen in the rest of the UK with affluent Richmond voting less for leave, and less affluent Barnet voting for it more.

The J.Rowntree Foundation picked out deprivation as an important driver of leave votes, so it feels like this is probably part of the story, what are your thoughts about it? It feels more salient than Empire to me!

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Geoffrey Watson

In reply to Adam Gilham

One of the difficulties in reconciling the statement about deprivation with the graph is that the written paragraph appears to refer to the UK, while the graph only shows results from England.

**3 days ago**

Report

Reply

15. **Recommend**



**Martin Williams**

Plenty of interesting things in the article. But I still don't get the evidence for the Empire/inequality link. The UK was different from other European countries from the 1980s because it had a government that wanted to make radical change to the previous consensus and which had 15 years in power to make those changes. The obvious explanation for that is the distinctive British electoral system in which the winner takes all, and the British Parliamentary system in which the winning party takes all, coupled with a political landscape where Opposition parties were spending a lot of time fighting each other. I can easily accept that the Empire tradition, education etc may have encouraged people to vote for this party, and that the economic system that was built on Empire was one where a lot of money could be made quickly by a small number of people who were in the financial services market and the Stock Exchange, post deregulation. Hence, greater inequality in the 80s and 90s. But I can't see that the existence of the Empire, or the end of the Empire, created the growing inequality - the article itself shows the richest starting to get a bit less rich from the early 20th century, when the Empire was still going strong, and only starting to get richer again in the later 70s, at least a decade after the Empire had effectively ceased to be. I don't see that much correlation, let alone causation. But I probably need to read the book!

**4 days ago**

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16. **Recommend**



**Cliff Brown**

An interesting angle, which may explain some of the (subconscious?) psychology behind British life, attitudes and culture.

But as far as growing inequality goes, I see the actual proximate causes as something far more specific, and stemming from the battle between the unions and Thatcher(ism). The suffocating stranglehold that the unions held over UK industry in the 1970s needed to be broken, and Thatcher's government succeeded.

But the way it then played out into rapid privatisation of state services and general liberalisation of corporate behaviours went far too far, with that ideology now known as neo-liberalism. (It is also a direct contributory factor of global warming due to the mismatch of privatised profits and socialised costs, but that's another story.)

It is now blindingly evident that the "trickle-down" theory of economics is more than wrong - it is a self-serving lie peddled by business owners and owners of capital. The reality is that the money flow is a "vacuum up" story.

Because "money makes money" the key to constraining growth in inequality is to facilitate the recycling of wealth down the strata to the less well off. And the primary tool for achieving that is income tax.

So my (unresearched and speculative) hypothesis is that there is a strong correlation between the income tax structure of a country and the level of inequality. Look at the countries with a more progressive income tax structure and you'll find less inequality. Look back over time and add in other tax elements and devise a "recycling factor" to summarise the share/speed of how money flows back down the chain.

Of course there are limits and diminishing returns to this. When the UK's top marginal tax rate was 98% for investment income (83% income tax plus 15% investment income surcharge) that was clearly stupid and begging for a revolution. But at least we got this classic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzSWNEBdsVg>

**4 days ago**

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17. Recommend



**Geoffrey Watson**

Re: "A textbook still in use in Sussex schools in the 70s described the races of mankind as the Caucasian or white race, the Mongoloid or yellow race and the Negro race."

I studied Physical Anthropology at a major University in the late 60s. Text books of this kind were on our reading list at the time. They gave an insight into the history of the subject and to earlier scientific investigations of human diversity. (Note that in scientific usage Caucasian is not "white", although it includes white people.) So the example you give is not a major anachronism.

Although frowned on politically, this division is still useful when analyzing diversity (although the inadequate explanations of the time have been superceded). For instance, one of the most recent books on DNA studies discusses our current knowledge in chapters on Europe and India (the old Caucasoid), the Americas (a more recent group that does not fit the old classification), East Asia (the old Mongoloid) and Africa (the old Negroid).

I apologise if you have read the book in question and found it to be a particularly egregious example, but often older scientific work is dismissed as "racist" simply because it discusses "race".

**4 days ago**

Report

Reply

18. Recommend



**Malcolm Peck**

It seems clear that in the minds of many of the British people the Empire never really ended but was repackaged and renamed to suit the reduced military capabilities of the British Isles. Far more than in other countries many of the evil aspects of the feudal based Empire system were allowed to remain with the built in belief in inequality and a ruling, wealthy elite.

From the figures the majority of the Leave voters were not just from the poorest in our society but from the quite comfortably off middle classes many of whom have clearly expressed a wish to try and recreate a more powerful Britain in the world – Global Britain. But not a more equal and fair one for its citizens, they don't care about that.

The Leave leaders and funders are all from the wealthy elite, all right or far right wing in their ideology, who want to distance Britain from a more equal Europe towards a greater dependency on America – the most unequal society in the world – that is where we seem to be heading if things don't dramatically change to a better way forward.

**4 days ago**

Report

Reply

1. Recommend



**Geoffrey Watson**

In reply to **Malcolm Peck**

One issue is how do we incorporate political power for the poorest level of society? In the UK the poor got the vote just after WW1 and Labour, which at the time was their political voice, got an

effective government just after WWII. But rapidly after that the factory system that had unified the workers became outdated, and the remnant was moved overseas to the poorer nations of the old European empires. Today nearly everyone who is not rich is either what has historically been the middle class or aspires to be middle class.

**3 days ago**

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19. [Recommend](#)



**John Doyle**

logged in via Facebook

Does English common law say anything about the duties of government with regard to how everyone in the nation is regarded? Laws in England go way back past the Constitutions of other nations so I wonder if there is no mandate for the government, both houses, to look out for the welfare of all citizens equally. I ask because they most assuredly are not doing that.

We need a reminder that the duty of government is to treat equally all members of society and not leave any one behind. Today's inequality is a certain condemnation of government bias towards the rich, in particular, and the influential donor class and old boy networks that conspire for advantage.

The economy is not a zero sum game. There is space, fiscal and emotional, for everyone in the country to be well satisfied in so far as resources permit with their lot. So there is no sin in being rich but there is sin in the rich tormenting the poor with Thatcher like policies etc. The social contract of the post WW2 era is still as valid as it ever was. The fact that the impetus came from the USA as a counter to communism doesn't mean we can forego it now that the communist threat has been extinguished. Thatcher and her stupid ignorance of economics [no such thing as society] has not been countered with the different news today.

The economic discourse is the prime mover of state towards a more equitable society, but based on a sense of duty it insists every politician must acknowledge daily so it is always in sight. Economics can fix the funding, for example by understanding that Taxes do not pay for national spending, and that the government is not like a household etc. There is fiscal space for a fully funded NHS, a free education, K-16, and a living wage for all who seek a job, guaranteed by the State as well as tax cuts for the rich.

Solutions exist. The politics needs to get up to speed, urgently.

**4 days ago**

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20. [Recommend](#)



**David Morley**

*The British thought that joining the European Economic Community in 1973 could replace this loss. It didn't, because the European relationship was mutual, rather than exploitative.*

"The British" here is an extremely broad term. Who exactly thought this? There were doubtless plenty who thought our future natural trading partners would be in Europe, but I don't recall anyone thinking this would be a one sided business in which the exploitation of the French and Germans would somehow substitute for the empire.

Indeed, in the 70s, there was a strong narrative of the useless, lazy, underproductive, over unionised British worker in comparison to his European counterparts. The feeling was that we were unable to compete in Europe, and in part this led to the Thatcher revolution.

3 days ago

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21. Recommend



Ralph Musgrave

logged in via Facebook

“The collapse of Britain’s empire in the decades after World War II was followed by a huge growth and then persistence of extreme economic inequality.” That’s debatable.

According to the source below, inequality in the UK immediately before WWII was higher than 60 years later. Given that the main “loss of empire event” was the loss of India immediately after WWII, and assuming that the decline in inequality between 1940 and 1970 was a straight line, if put in a chart, then arguably there was little change in the level of inequality as between the last days of the empire and 60 years later.

<https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/how-has-inequality-changed>

a day ago

Report

This graph may be of some use to Ralph, the empire collapsed after WW2 with almost all of the last colonies gaining their freedom in the 1970s:

