

Britain: Dazed & Confused

BRITAIN, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The only European state – excepting Switzerland, and Sweden – not to have collapsed within living memory in a maelstrom of war and invasion. Britain, the country that ‘stood alone’ in 1940 against the Third Reich (along with Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, assorted Crown Colonies and Protectorates). A robust democracy, a sovereign state . . . the envy of the world. A country, alone amongst the nations of the earth, with an imperial monarchy, universal health insurance, and an unmatched sense of fair play and decency.

This is also a country with an unexamined past. A country that has largely forgotten the fall of Singapore to General Tomoyuki Yamashita on the 15th February 1942, and largely forgotten that it was saved from absolute defeat and humiliation in that war only by the victory of Soviet and American-led forces. Grippled by the barbarism of our enemies, and amnesia concerning our own conduct, we have for the most part been incapable of reflecting on the two million dead in the Bengal Famine of 1943, let alone upon eugenics and the career of Sir Francis Galton, or the assumption of racial superiority that sustained the Mother Country’s imperial rule throughout the nineteenth century.

After the loss of India in 1947, and of Palestine the following year, the Labour Party steadied the imperial ship of state with the development of Britain’s own nuclear weapons, joining NATO, and by waging war against the MNLA (Malay National Liberation Army), followed in short order by sending conscript soldiers into battle against the forces of the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Peoples Republic of China. The Labour Party made some tentative steps in favour of colonial freedom, but it actually took the Conservative Government of Harold Macmillan, reeling from the Suez debacle of 1956, to begin the process of decolonisation, with the independence of the Gold Coast (Ghana) the following year.

Neither the Labour Party, nor the Trade Union Congress have ever come to terms with their involvement in sustaining and ratifying Britain's imperial rule. This is of a piece with the inability of the Tories to grasp the nettle of Britain's militarism, preferring always to endorse accounts in which our imperial domination can be favourably compared to the unbridled violence of the Belgians, the Dutch, or the French. The British Empire was, apparently, always preferable to other forms of enslavement and subordination on offer at any time in the past.

Why does this forgetfulness matter?

It matters because most British people still think of our state as matchless, a byword for fairness and decency. Indeed, belief in the sovereignty of our state is rooted in our grandiose past, in which despite enslaving millions, we ourselves, we Britons, would rule the waves and "never, never, never" should "be slaves". Despite the sober realisation that our greatest days might actually be in the past, most of us remain doggedly convinced that we are the envy of the world.

This patriotic sentiment is widely cleaved to by people who simultaneously know that it is imaginary, merely a thing of days long gone. We know the empire is no more, but we also know that what made us great, unique, and remarkable, lives on, and must at all costs be preserved. This is why, no doubt, that eighty per cent of the population are monarchists, and continue to distrust Johnny Foreigner, motivated as he inevitably is, by envy of our state and sceptred isle.

We remain traumatised by our relative decline. We know that we are outclassed by Japan, Germany, and now by China and India. Soon, very soon,

Nigeria, and Indonesia, will join the growing number of states greater by most measures, than Great Britain herself. The inevitability of this course of historical development is known to us all. And, yet, somehow, we must cling to notions of our superiority, of the unique experience of our state and nation, of Magna Carta, of our thousand-year-old parliament, our common law tradition, our national sovereignty.

The steady decay of irate unionism in the North of Ireland coupled with the rise of Scottish nationalism number amongst the most bewildering responses to the relative decline of our state. Faced with the erosion of Britain's status and power, Irish unionists want stubbornly to insist upon their undoubted Britishness while calling for continued membership of the European Union which facilitates free and open relations with the Irish Republic. Asserting their cultural distinctiveness by refusing to surrender on matters of language, homosexuality, marriage equality, and abortion, Protestant unionists have relegated their legendary hostility towards Dublin to the second or third tier of their concerns.

Meanwhile, the Scots, have restored William Wallace and Robert Bruce to memory. They have revived the chronicles of clearances, starvation, and emigration, to rival those of the Catholic Irish. Simultaneously, they have largely forgotten their active participation in the destruction of the Highland clans, in building the British Empire, and staffing the modern British state. Scottish nationalists undoubtedly prefer stories of oppression by the English and of overmighty authorities in London. They favour the dissolution of the British state in favour of warm relations between Edinburgh and Brussels.

Alternatively, the well-heeled throughout Britain are largely committed to the *status quo ante* – they were doing just fine with things as they were – so “why mend what isn't broke?” Membership of the European Union fitted well with their lifestyles and ambitions. At ease with globalisation, and benefitting from European integration, the prosperous in London and the South

East, and the intelligentsia everywhere, see themselves as the enemies of the rank ignorance and backwardness that they imagine inspires hatred of all things *Communaux*. Despite distrusting the unlettered mob, and *hoy polloi*, the well-heeled have roused themselves to militancy with demands for a People's Vote which like love for the People's Princess is imagined as a willing surrender to well-meaning democratic sentiment – the People's Vote is to be a plebiscite for the 'emotionally intelligent', no less.

This is why the European Union, and leaving it, is proving to be such a tangled and unnerving experience. The atavism of the right, is well matched on the left, by a return to social democratic nostrums sustainable only by the relative freedom of action enjoyed by the nation states of yesteryear. Even conservative libertarians appear to be convinced that Europe's erosion of our sovereignty is the principal cause of the decay of our democracy. Apparently, only a return to national sovereignty, and the freedom to trade with whoever we choose, will restore democratic government.

There is no doubt in my mind that the European Union is run by a range of institutions operating without much public scrutiny or democratic control. In this, of course, it is similar to the World Trade Organisation, Lloyds of London, the New York Stock Exchange, the Bank of England, the Monetary Policy Committee, and so on. The world market operates well beyond the control of our elected politicians, and of the Lords and judges, installed by fiat by British Prime Ministers, using *Our Sovereign Lady, the Queen*, as cover.

Despite knowing the nature of the international order regarding trade and military affairs, British politicians of both left and right, appear to believe that without the stranglehold of Brussels, and the European Court of Justice, Britain would once again enjoy unencumbered independence and democracy. We will be able to trade with who we like, and according to our political disposition, be able to

nationalise and renationalise utilities, and other enterprises at will. Paradoxically, socialism, *and* unbridled capitalist development, together with the restoration of a robust and healthy democracy, will all be rendered possible, simply by restoring our national sovereignty.

It is difficult to account for these fantasies when it is evidently the case that all of those gripped by them know full well their illusory character. However, it would be wrong simply to regard this collision between the real and the imaginary as the product of dishonesty. It is true of course that many older people hanker for the days when Britain was white, monolingual, and nominally Christian. It is also true that this yearning is shared by many younger people, victims of low pay and simmering poverty, who believe in some inchoate sense that things would be better for them, without the European Union.

From the left to the right, from Remainers to Leavers, from ScotsNats to Ulster Protestants, historical fantasies, and convenient social prejudices, abound. For red-hot democrats and fulsome free-speakers, along with those fighting for Corbyn's oxymoronic 'revolutionary social democracy' the nation state of old inspires their dreams. Whether 'in' or 'out' they remain deeply committed to the restoration of Great Britain Ltd. They, together with their principal opponents, the swashbuckling capitalist bastards – those saturated with entrepreneurial spirit – can't wait for the boundless opportunities offered by freedom to trade with all and sundry.

The problem is not that all these enthusiasms and *idée fixe* collide and contradict each other, the real difficulty is that they spring from imaginary concerns about an imaginary country. While the young enthusiasts for Jeremy Corbyn dream of 'internationalised social democratic measures', the regular Brexiteers imagine that fulsome surrender to globalisation and unfettered labour markets will result in dynamic growth and, eventually, to rising prosperity for all.

None of these offers and ersatz solutions address our actual circumstances. Evidently, our state, and the common assumptions of our political class – of the Labour Party, the Conservatives, the trade unions, and the mainstream media – are fit for purpose. The changes that our economy, the tempo of our lives, and cultural habits, have undergone in the last thirty or so years, have rendered many of our institutions redundant. Civil society has been hollowed out, making our democracy little more than a dumb show. And, the rule of law has become increasingly vulnerable, as democratic scrutiny and control is eroded by pressures exerted by vast and instantaneous capital flows, the conduct of global companies, and a raft of international institutions over which we have little or no control.

The Referendum, Brexiteers, the proposed People's Plebiscite, the shenanigans of the ScotsNats and the Democratic Unionist Party, the whole kit-and-kaboodle, have prevented any serious attempt to discover how best to improve our productivity, and how best to overhaul rapidly our energy and transport infrastructures. This battle about sovereignty, for and against Brussels, has done nothing to prepare the population or the trade unions for the transformation of the labour market by robots and other technologies. It has not helped us consider how best to restructure our state in a manner that corresponds to the needs of our people – it has obscured vital recognition of our reduced status, and our smaller purchase on world affairs, and it has done nothing to strengthen or revive our democracy.

The sooner some settlement, *any settlement*, is reached the better, because only then will it become apparent exactly how irrelevant arguments about sovereignty actually are in the struggle to tackle the real political and economic challenges we face.