



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

The Empire Strikes Back

Brexit, History and the Decline of Global Britain

Eoin Drea





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Credits

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The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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Editor: Eoin Drea, Senior Research Officer, Martens Centre

External editing: Communicative English bvba

Layout and cover design: RARO S.L.

Typesetting: Victoria Agency

Printed in Belgium by Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke

This publication has received funding from the European Parliament.

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Keywords Brexit – European Union – British Empire – History – Global Britain – European integration

About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 31 member foundations and two permanent guest foundations in 24 EU and non-EU countries. The Martens Centre takes part in the preparation of EPP programmes and policy documents. It organises seminars and training on EU policies and on the process of European integration.

The Martens Centre also contributes to formulating EU and national public policies. It produces research studies and books, electronic newsletters, policy briefs and the twice-yearly *European View* journal. Its research activities are divided into six clusters: party structures and EU institutions, economic and social policies, EU foreign policy, environment and energy, values and religion, and new societal challenges. Through its papers, conferences, authors' dinners and website, the Martens Centre offers a platform for discussion among experts, politicians, policymakers and the European public.

About the author



Dr Eoin Drea is Senior Research Officer at the Martens Centre. His Ph.D. studies focused on the development of the Anglo-Irish banking system in the 1922–44 period. He is a regular contributor to media debates on the future of EU–UK relations and his opinion pieces have featured in *The Guardian*, *Politico* and *The Irish Times*. He is a former Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholar (University College Cork) and Postdoctoral Fellow (Trinity College Dublin).

Executive summary¹



For those seeking to understand the debate in Britain about leaving the EU, it is important to understand that history—or rather a certain Eurosceptic Tory interpretation of British and Imperial history—played a key role in building and sustaining the momentum for Brexit, both during and after the 2016 referendum.

Brexit is not fundamentally about Europe. Rather the debate within Britain is of a much more existential type. It is an example of a fragmented political system (itself reflecting a growing polarisation in society) attempting to deal belatedly with a century of rapid social, economic, political and cultural change. It is the Britain of today still struggling to shed the deeply held historical prejudices of an imperial past.

While France and Germany both see European integration as the mechanism to secure peace and maximise their global role, Britain's involvement in the EU is a torturous example of 'British leadership' still seeking a home. Thus, Brexit was (is) destined to occur owing to Britain's impossible conditions for continuing to remain a member of a community-based, compromise-led, multinational EU.

The inevitability of Britain leaving the EU is based on the failure of Britain to mould the European integration process to her intergovernmental, free-trading, Atlanticist design. For hard-line Brexiteers, Margaret Thatcher's dystopian view—'we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at European level'—is the odious reality restraining a great, globalist, trading Britain.²

This vision, although not based on empire, is 'of' empire. It seeks to restate the primacy of the British state over European affairs and represents a continuation of four distinct historical narratives emphasising British exceptionalism, a clear sense of relative decline compared to Germany, a misunderstanding of Britain's role in the Anglo-American relationship, and a misinterpretation of the objectives and priorities of the EU.

¹ An earlier edited version of this executive summary appeared as E. Drea, 'For the EU to Prosper, Britain Must Leave', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2019.

² M. Thatcher, 'Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech")', Bruges, 20 September 1988.



In this context, the process of Britain leaving the EU can be seen as the triumph of a misrepresented and selective view of British Imperial history and an unbending view of the primacy of the nation state. This narrative was combined (quite quickly and unpredictably) with a rise in economic nationalism and populism stimulated by the global economic crisis that commenced in 2007. This combination, in turn, challenged long-established political norms such as Britain's membership of the EU. These were challenges that were largely based on a mutated form of British declinism and a fatalist view of the EU.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that it is not in the interests of Brussels that Britain should now seek to remain (or gain re-admittance) as a full member of the EU. Rather, Britain's historical self-conception is more conducive to a looser, yet clearly defined relationship with Brussels, based on shared political, economic and security interests. Such an arrangement—a bespoke Anglo-Continental compact—is more consistent with Britain's political realities and accepted historical narratives. It will also better preserve the integrity of the EU's internal cohesiveness, which since 2016 has become unavoidably intertwined with Britain's search for relevance in this post-colonial age.



Introduction



Boris Johnson, in campaigning to leave the EU in May 2016, stated that the choice the British people faced was between a ‘dynamic liberal cosmopolitan open global free-trading prosperous Britain, or a Britain where we remain subject to an undemocratic system devised in the 1950s that is now actively responsible for low growth and in some cases economic despair’.³ This narrative played a central role during the Brexit referendum campaign and continues to be an important element of British political discourse. This view sees trading Britain as being ‘held back’ by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, thereby restricting the ability of British businesses to flourish in the global economy.

Since 2002 this issue has often been subsumed into a wider socio-economic debate on how the influx of EU migrants has reduced job opportunities for British citizens, forced down wages for many British workers, and led to increased strain on the health and education systems. If only, the argument goes, Britain could be free of all the burdensome requirements of EU membership (such as free movement of people), then Britain could once again become a truly global economy.

This paper sets out to address the role that history—or at least a certain Eurosceptic Conservative interpretation of British and Imperial history—played in the Brexit referendum of 2016 and the subsequent negotiation period. In particular, this paper takes as its starting point the view that ‘history has played and continues to play a powerful role in British public life. The past is appealed to as explanation of the present, as legitimation for this or that policy, the place where a true national essence is revealed’.⁴

Why is history so important in understanding Brexit? For Britain, two points are relevant. First, history should be central to the EU’s understanding of why Brexit is occurring and, perhaps more importantly, of how economic nationalism and populism can combine to challenge the political establishment. Second, the example of how history—or, rather, a widely accepted, national view of history—can shape a member state’s relationship with Brussels is important in determining the future prospects of a ‘global’ Britain free from EU membership.

³ B. Johnson, ‘The Liberal Cosmopolitan Case to Vote Leave’, *Why Vote Leave*, 9 May 2016.

⁴ D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), introduction.



This research paper is structured as follows. Section 2 identifies four specific historical narratives utilised by Brexiteers that are continuing to shape UK public debate regarding Britain's relationship with the EU. Section 3 utilises the example of the Suez crisis of 1956 to illustrate how the Brexiteer approach to misusing history is deeply selective and ignores obvious parallels with Brexit. Section 4 shows how this misrepresentation of history has been combined with a mix of economic nationalism and populism to challenge long-established political norms in the period since 2015. Section 5 offers conclusions.



**The triumph
of the past**



The vision of Europe holding back the potential of Britain is not based on defined economic, social or political metrics. How could it be when Britain, as leading Brexiteers are keen to point out, remains the fifth largest economy in the world and an important player in all key international institutions? Or when the British government's review of the impact of the EU on British legislation, launched with much fanfare in 2012, was ignored by successive Tory-led governments owing to the fact that no report contained in its 32 volumes 'demonstrated that too much power resided in Brussels'.⁵

From a Brussels-based perspective, the Brexiteer approach continues to be addressed in a multitude of political, economic and social terms. How could Britain leave the single market? Do the British understand how long it will take to negotiate a trade deal with third countries? What will happen to the Irish peace process if a hard border is imposed? Yet this approach seeks to apply the institutionalised logic of EU decision-making to a British national debate which, in reality, has little to do with what powers do or do not reside in Brussels. Rather the debate within Britain is of a much more existential type. It is as if the Brexit referendum has brought out into the open the deep divisions—political, economic, social and cultural—that have long remained just below the surface in British public discourse. Brexit is, to a very significant extent, not even really about the EU, but rather 'a way for Britain to feel big again' in an environment where Britain views itself as bigger (and more important) than Europe.⁶ Rather this narrative seeks 'a yearning for a return to an idealised past when Britain was Britain still . . . —proud, prosperous and seemingly standing alone'.⁷

One of the great ironies of the entire Brexit process is that Britain—notwithstanding the often negative media reporting from Continental Europe—remains a remarkably flexible economy. It is also a diverse society that continues to deal with the realities of large-scale, long-term immigration, first predominantly from its wider Commonwealth and more recently from Continental Europe. It has also, like all traditional imperial powers, undergone a painful structural transformation since the start of the twentieth century—from that of an industrially based global empire to a key national proponent of economic and personal freedom. The City of London's financial centre may represent the symbol of Britain's continuing liberal global role, but in the post-industrial cities of the north of England, the old mining towns of south Wales and the rusting docks

⁵ Institute for International and European Affairs, 'The Curious Incident of the UK Competences Review', *IIEA European Affairs* blog, 14 March 2016.

⁶ R. Heath, 'Brexit Britain: Small, Boring and Stupid', *Politico*, 13 December 2018.

⁷ T. G. Otte, 'Brexit, History and Identity . . . and Hitler', *University of East Anglia*, EU Referendum Media Centre, undated.



on the Clyde, the legacy of Britain's century of transformation is everywhere to be seen. The unevenness of this economic and social transformation is itself partly the cause of Britain choosing to leave the EU in 2016.

It is this reality of Britain's changing global role, and the widespread perception of relative decline it invokes within large portions of Britain itself, that underpins the hard-line Brexiteer approach to 'taking back control'. So, although Brexiteers may rail against the creep of an EU super-state, it is more the reality of Britain's positioning in the EU and its self-perceived lack of influence on EU affairs (and by association global affairs) that is driving this narrative of an unfettered post-EU trading Britain. In this respect, the difference between Britain and other large post-imperial powers, such as France and Germany, should not be underestimated.

The events of the twentieth century have imbued France and Germany with a deep historic sense of responsibility to act as the drivers of the European integration process. The position of Britain has always been more ambiguous. How could it not be, given both its history and geography? While Churchill may have done much to promote real Franco-German rapprochement post-1945, he viewed Britain as essentially supporting, but not being part of, further European integration. This vision of 'we are with them, but not of them' reflected Britain's colonial history, continuing global aspirations and wariness of deepening Franco-German political cooperation.⁸ Viewed from a specifically historical context, the Treaty of Rome represented Britain's 1914 strategic nightmare writ large. Britain's resulting membership of the EU was therefore marked with an implicit, but clear, detachment from the wider integration process,⁹ thus creating a situation which eventually resulted in a declining interest in, and promotion of, British participation in the institutions of the European Union.¹⁰

⁸ W. Churchill, Speech to the British House of Commons, 11 May 1953.

⁹ H. Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

¹⁰ UK, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'The UK Staff Presence in the EU Institutions', Second Report of Session 2013–14, 25 June 2013. This report noted that although Britain's population comprised 12.5% of the EU's population in 2012, only 4.6% of staff members in the European Commission were British nationals.



The centrality of history

It is, therefore, the centrality of history—or rather a specific view of Britain’s imperial past—that is the most important element of the hard-line Brexiteers’ rationale for leaving the EU. Although sporadically acknowledged in debates since 2016, this historical context has escaped detailed examination in a Brussels-based setting.¹¹ As a result, a largely ahistorical, more institutional, approach to Brexit now dominates, which emphasises the technicalities of the Brexit process in terms of transition periods, customs unions, hard borders and divorce bills. This is also represented in a noticeable undercurrent in EU-based debates, as the EU has long viewed Britain as a drag on the federalist tendencies of some other Continental European states.

So what can actual history tell us about the Brexiteer vision of a global, post-EU trading Britain? It is possible to identify four distinct historical strands. These separate, but interrelated narratives, combine together to create a vision of British history which is, at its very core, populist in nature and increasingly detached from the economic and social realities underpinning modern Britain.

- i. **Britain’s finest hour.** Nothing defines more the British exceptionalism strand of the Brexit conversation than the historical memory—still highly relevant in British society today—of Britain standing alone in 1940 with the might of much of Europe ranged against it. This narrative is consistently reinforced in popular culture and remains at the core of public consciousness.¹² The ‘popular culture’ approach to history has been used by key proponents of Brexit as a way of ‘articulating Britain’s place in the world in historical terms’.¹³ In this view, the organisational victory of Dunkirk, the brav-

¹¹ A notable exception is P. Wintour, ‘German Ambassador: Second World War Image of Britain Has Fed Euroscepticism’, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2018. This is an interview with Peter Ammon, a former German ambassador to Britain, who specifically identified the historical narrative of Britain standing alone in the Second World War as being a key factor feeding contemporary British Euroscepticism.

¹² In 2017, *Dunkirk*, a film charting the escape of the British Army from Northern France in 1940 was the second most popular film in British cinemas with takings of over £56 million. In 2018, the film *Darkest Hour* examined the response of Winston Churchill to the crises of 1940 and 1941 and took nearly £30 million from British cinemagoers.

¹³ M. Finn, ‘Post-War Fantasies and Brexit: The Delusional View of Britain’s Place in the World’, *The London School of Economics and Political Science* blog, 21 June 2016.



ery of the Battle of Britain and the moral courage of Churchill provide a ready-made template for contemporary Britain to once again stand up to the creeping threat of Europe. Or, in the words of Boris Johnson, we can be the ‘heroes of Europe by voting to leave’.¹⁴ In a way, this idealised memory of the early 1940s is reinforced by a continuing—and often very uncompromising commemoration of those who lost their lives in time of war.¹⁵

The strength of this strand of historical memory should not be underestimated. Its pervasiveness across the political spectrum was reflected in its continuing presence before, during and after the Brexit referendum campaign. Yet, it is a view that is fundamentally compromised by the realities of British history.

From an economic, military and political perspective, Britain, rather than facing overwhelming odds, actually stood at the head of an economic colossus which included an armaments production system that far surpassed those of its rivals.¹⁶ For Brexiteers, this historical reality has been replaced by a nostalgic appeal to a wider national consciousness emphasising exceptionalism and courage. In the context of the Brexit debate since 2016, such an approach found fertile ground in a historically rooted anxiety regarding the economic and political power of Europe’s other traditional great powers, Germany and France.

- ii. **‘In 1945 one country lost World War 2. It was us’.**¹⁷ Although the victory of Britain and her allies in the Second World War is a historical fact, it did not usher in a golden dawn for Britain. Rather, it acted as a fuse for the gradual weakening of Britain’s global role, both politically and economically. This perception of decline, as felt by many ardent Brexiteers (but also by significantly larger elements of the British population), should be viewed not only as a complicated expression of a post-Empire reality, but also as an acknowledgement of Britain’s dependence on the US after 1945.

¹⁴ T. Ross, ‘Boris Johnson Interview: We Can Be the “Heroes of Europe” by Voting to Leave’, *The Telegraph*, 14 May 2016.

¹⁵ Irish professional footballer, James McClean, is regularly verbally abused at football grounds in Britain for refusing to wear a poppy each November to commemorate the dead of the 1914–18 war. As a player of Northern Irish nationalist heritage his stance seems to have particularly inflamed self-professed British ‘unionists’. See, for example, T. Embury-Dennis, ‘James McClean Abused for Not Wearing a Poppy’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 November 2018.

¹⁶ D. Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 299–302.

¹⁷ N. Clegg, ‘Episode 1: King of Chaos Nigel Farage’, *Anger Management Podcast*, 18 April 2018.



This feeling, as highlighted in Section 4, of Britain's best days being behind her was a key factor for those voting Leave in the Brexit referendum.

For those, like Nigel Farage, who see the pre-1945 period as an example of British success, it was a mistake of British governments in the 1960s and 1970s to finally focus on Europe, rather than their Commonwealth cousins, as the driver of trade and growth.¹⁸ To them the rationing and austerity in Britain which persisted into the 1950s, the Suez fiasco of 1956 and the loss of the Empire in subsequent decades were precursors to the ultimate surrender of position (and influence) resulting from membership of an eventual 28-member EU. For them, French refusals to acquiesce to Britain joining the emerging European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1960s highlighted clearly the perfidious motives of those supporting greater European integration.

Under this narrative, Britain today, once freed from the burden of Brussels' regulations, would again claim a leadership role, a role that combines historical relationships with a renewed Anglo-American bond (as set out below). Unfortunately, the flawed nature of this vision is based on a wilful reimagining of the historical truth. Britain post-1945 tried wilfully to reassert its global dominance, particularly within its fraying Empire and traditional spheres of influence, but realities dictated that it was her balance of payments, foreign currency reserves and the value of sterling which ultimately determined Britain's position in the wider world.¹⁹ Britain's global position had by the late 1960s transformed into an 'East of Suez' policy, largely stripped of Middle East and Asian commitments, driven by budgetary realities. This was the actual environment underpinning Britain's move towards the EEC from the early 1960s on.²⁰

- iii. **Friends with benefits?** Notwithstanding Britain joining the then EEC in 1973, it is the Anglo-American partnership which continues to define Brexiteer views on Britain's position in the global economy. In the European Parliament in March 2018, Nigel Farage defined Britain as the US's 'best ally in the world'. According to him, it is a relationship so strong that it would only take 48 hours to

¹⁸ J. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 353.

¹⁹ See A. Milward, *The Economic Effects of the Two World Wars on Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1970) for a good overview.

²⁰ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 357–9.



negotiate an Anglo-American trade deal post Brexit.²¹ Such an affinity for the ‘special relationship’ is not new in British political debates, but its prominence has increased dramatically in the period since the Brexit referendum was called in early 2016.

For Brexiteers the historical basis is clear; Anglo-American relations—economic, political, social and cultural—long pre-date the Second World War and are the basis for global economic progress and prosperity. Thus, liberated from EU membership, Britain will be free to re-establish closer ties with the US (complemented by the Commonwealth) and embark on a renewed focus on global trade. For the Brexiteers, this will mark a return to the ‘Golden Days’ of Anglo-American relations most prominently associated with Tory Prime Ministers Harold Macmillan and Margaret Thatcher in the late 1950s and 1980s respectively.²²

Again this interpretation of twentieth-century British history is based on a very selective judgement of Britain’s global role since 1945. However, a more balanced view of Anglo-American relations post 1945 provides a different emphasis. First, in both 1918 and 1945 the Americans applied strict financial rules to their British friends, regardless of London’s views of their special relationship. The end of the Second World War brought a sudden end to American financial aid and it was only the onset of the Cold War which allowed American plans for global financial reconstruction to become compatible with British visions of a sterling economic area based on the emerging Commonwealth.²³ Second, the view from Washington has long judged Britain—in economic and political terms at least—as very much the junior partner in the Anglo-American relationship. This view has been worsened—not improved—by Britain’s decision to leave the EU.²⁴ Third, since the time of President John F. Kennedy the Americans have understood that British membership of the EU was to be supported for the simple reason that a Europe with Britain playing a full role was much more likely to be a Europe more sympathetic to US interests.²⁵ Thus, for the US, Europe with Britain as a full member was the key objective.

²¹ J. Stone, ‘Nigel Farage Says It Will Take Britain 48 Hours to Do Post-Brexit Trade Deal with Donald Trump’, *The Independent*, 13 March 2018.

²² N. J. Ashton, *Harold Macmillan and the ‘Golden Days’ of Anglo-American Relations Revisited, 1957–63* (London: LSE Research Online, 2006).

²³ P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction* (New York: Longman Publishing, 277–9).

²⁴ D. Wemer, ‘A Waning US-UK “Special Relationship”’, *Atlantic Council*, 10 July 2018.

²⁵ D. R. Thorpe, *Supremacy: The Life of Harold Macmillan* (London: Pimlico, 2011), 398.



- iv. **This is not what we signed up for.** Contemporary British debates about EU membership also exhibit a clear strand relating to how Britain signed up for the EEC in 1973 on the basis of its economic potential, rather than the implicit political goals of some of its founding members. This view sees the EU as having wandered far from its original objectives in the hope of sustaining its ever increasing bureaucracy that stretches into all aspects of British life. In this narrative, the EU is no longer a vehicle for economic cooperation, but more a political United States of Europe in waiting. This evolution, as many Brexiteers are keen to point out, is of no interest to a resurgent global Britain. This approach can be said to be based on William Hague's call in 2011 to 'not let ourselves be sucked into a federal state'.²⁶ Although Hague was advocating working within the EU framework, his subsequent conversion to Brexit can be said to mirror that of a significant element of the Conservative Party in the period since 2011.

This is, by far, the most complex of the historical narratives utilised by Brexiteers and is closely connected to the evolution of British political thought post 1945. It is a combination of the three strands highlighted above and is based on a vision of the EU as a Franco-German construct that is daily edging closer to deeper political union. However, this approach ignores how British views of European integration in the 1950/60s coloured subsequent British membership of the EU and impacted significantly on Franco-German views of British motives. While it is necessary to acknowledge the distinct nature of British identity vis-à-vis Europe, this cannot be the sole arbiter in defining this 'not this sort of Europe' debate.²⁷

Rather, it is important to illustrate that recent Brexit debates about the increasing political scope of the EU are nothing new in a British context. As early as 1959, Conservative Party stalwart Reginald Maudling noted that 'for us to sign the Treaty of Rome would be to accept the ultimate goal, political federation in Europe, including ourselves'.²⁸ In fact, it was British recalcitrance (at times almost approaching menace) about European integration in the 1950s that drove Continental wariness of British involvement in the 1960s and beyond.²⁹ The British approach—first, to doubt that the inte-

²⁶ W. Hague, 'William Hague on the EU Membership Vote: We Won't Leave Europe, But It Won't Rule Us', *The Telegraph*, 21 October 2011.

²⁷ J. Dennison and N. Carl, *The Ultimate Causes of Brexit: History, Culture, and Geography*, LSE Research Online (London, 18 July 2016).

²⁸ Thorpe, *Supermac*, 618. Maudling was a Conservative Party chancellor of the exchequer (1962–4) and home secretary (1970–2). He twice ran unsuccessfully for the Conservative Party leadership.

²⁹ Young, *Blessed Plot*, 113–18.



gration process would amount to anything substantial; second, to attempt to dilute its provisions by widening and weakening its membership; and third, through nuanced allusions to future economic and political discord—contributed to France’s famous ‘*non*’ to British membership in 1963.³⁰

In effect, Europe was, for Britain, an economic necessity, not a political choice.³¹ In terms of historical analysis, the Brexiteer mantra of ‘taking back control’ can be viewed as the fulfilment (albeit in a negative sense) of Macmillan’s strategy towards European integration in the late 1950s: ‘we must take the lead, either in widening their project, or if they will not co-operate with us, in opposing it’.³² Historically, it is clear that Britain’s failure to assume leadership of the EU (an impossible standard in a community-based organisation) has been a key factor in current Brexit debates. Indeed, in the words of one British academic, ‘the liberation that Britain so urgently needs is not from Brussels, but from its own illusions’.³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 366.

³² Young, *Blessed Plot*, 116.

³³ R. Saunders, ‘Britain Must Rid Itself of the Delusion That It Is Big, Bold and in Charge’, *The Guardian*, 9 January 2019.



**Brexit and
the lost
lessons of
the Suez crisis**



The historical strands outlined above are, by their very nature, closely interlinked and share many common threads. However, as interpreted by those seeking a new globalist Britain, they are often utilised in ways that are contradictory to their actual historical relevance. Based on an analysis of those narratives set out in Section 2, it is clear that the historically driven evocations of Brexiteers are not based on actual realities but rather display a ‘profound ignorance of history. They evoke the past as an idyll to which the people will return’.³⁴ In fact, the Brexiteer approach to misusing history is not only illusionary, but also deeply selective. This selectivity further weakens any attempt by pro-Europe campaigners in Britain to place EU membership in a positive historical context. It also makes a populist, incomplete version of twentieth-century British history a key pillar of British society in a post-Brexit environment.

For example, the Suez crisis of 1956 is commonly regarded as a significant event marking a turning point in Britain’s traditional global role.³⁵ The aborted seizure of the Suez Canal by British military forces (with French and Israeli support) ‘burned away illusions’ about Britain’s place in the world.³⁶ Its real impact was to highlight how a combination of financial realities (the invasion led to an immediate run on sterling) and political imperatives (the US did not support it) illustrated that ‘Britain had lost the capacity for acting alone without a nod of approval from Washington’.³⁷ As highlighted in section 2, Suez and its direct aftermath had lasting implications for Britain’s relationships with both the US and Europe. Although, Suez was not the totem of decline sometimes attributed to it in the popular media, it clearly revealed the reality of Britain’s place in the global order.³⁸

For Brexiteers, these real lessons from 1956 are casually ignored in favour of an unspecified, vacuous view of a stronger ‘global Britain running a truly global foreign policy’. Unsurprisingly, the example of Suez has been absent from Brexiteers’ historical reasoning. Rather, for Brexiteers, leaving the EU presents an opportunity to reintroduce a British military presence into the Middle East/Asia and to provide these ar-

³⁴ F. O’Toole, ‘The Second World War Will Finally End in 2019’, *The Irish Times*, 5 January 2019.

³⁵ In October 1956 Israel (followed by Britain and France) invaded Egypt with the stated objective of re-establishing international control over the Suez Canal. The canal had been nationalised by the Egyptian leader Col. Nasser in July 1956. However, the invasion was not supported by the US, led to severe speculation against the British economy, and was ultimately abandoned by Britain and France. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden subsequently resigned in January 1957.

³⁶ A. Rawnsley, ‘A Bad Brexit Will Not Be as Terrible as the Suez Crisis. It Will Be Far Worse’, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2018.

³⁷ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 363.

³⁸ G. C. Peden, ‘Suez and Britain’s Decline as a World Power’, *The Historical Journal* 55/4 (2012), 1073–96.



eas with the distinctly floral sounding ‘moral leadership, the military leadership and the global leadership’ afforded by a dynamic Britain.³⁹ How these objectives could be achieved in an era of declining defence budgets is, unsurprisingly, not considered. However, a much more historically relevant approach to Suez has been adopted by those seeking to protect Britain’s future relationship with the EU, in a debate which acknowledges the potentially disastrous economic consequences of Brexit.⁴⁰

In this context, the historical vision of Brexiteers—while utilising the historical narratives of twentieth-century bravery, exceptionalism and Anglo-American ties—actually envisages a pre-1914 global reinstatement of the British Empire. It is obvious that, while superficially attractive in terms of imagery and public consciousness, this ideal is completely unattainable and ridiculously naïve. The Brexiteer vision of Britain also wilfully ignores perhaps the greatest lesson of the Suez crisis. Namely, that lacking the resources and wealth of the US, Britain quickly turned her gaze towards Europe as a means of maintaining her global status. As previously noted, this ‘pivot to Europe’ was actually encouraged by the US and reflected the fact that, for Britain, there was never going to be ‘a special relationship of near equality with the USA’.⁴¹

A further two points—both overlooked by Brexiteers—relating to Suez are of direct relevance to contemporary debates. Firstly, the Tory government’s response in 1956 resulted in deep cleavages across British society. It divided political parties (particularly the ruling Conservative Party), friends and families, and split the public between those supporting military action and those arguing for a more measured, internationalist response.⁴² The Tory parliamentary party of that time was in favour of a military response, in contrast to the higher priority given to wider diplomatic efforts in the UN by the Labour Party.

Suez fanned widely divergent responses from the media, with the overwhelming support that existed in July 1956 ebbing steadily away by the time of actual military confrontation in November of the same year.⁴³ Similarly, contemporary accounts of public opinion at that time highlight ‘a rather close balance be-

³⁹ G. Williamson, ‘Britain to Become True Global Player’, *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2018.

⁴⁰ J. Johnson, ‘Why I Cannot Support the Government’s Proposed Brexit Deal’, *Medium*, 9 November 2018. He described Brexit as ‘a failure of British statecraft on a scale unseen since the Suez crisis’.

⁴¹ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 277–8.

⁴² C. Booker, ‘The Hysteria Over Brexit is Reminiscent of the Suez Canal Crisis’, *The Telegraph*, 29 July 2018.

⁴³ G. Parmentier, ‘The British Press in the Suez Crisis’, *The Historical Journal* 23/2 (1980), 435–48.



tween approval and disapproval of the military action'.⁴⁴ As with Brexit, Suez also immediately claimed the resignation of a previously well-regarded Tory prime minister (Anthony Eden) and is correctly viewed as a significant failure of British foreign policy.

Secondly, Suez (for all its imperialist delusions) did not spell electoral disaster for the Tory party or for the British economy. Under Harold Macmillan (ironically one of the staunchest initial backers of military action in Suez) the Conservative Party successfully retained power in 1959 with a larger majority. It was national economic issues such as unemployment and taxation which propelled the Tories to victory—an interesting counterpoint to the election of 2017.⁴⁵ Increasing middle-class mobility, economic growth and a re-cast Anglo-American anti-Communist alliance (albeit with Britain as very much the junior partner) sustained a relatively harmonious political landscape for the Tories up to the early 1960s. It was almost as if Suez was a horrible aberration which was better forgotten, notwithstanding its obvious implications for Britain's subsequent global strategy. In the context of David Cameron's and Teresa May's negotiating tactics with the EU since 2015 it is interesting to note that Prime Minister Eden 'was the last Prime Minister to believe Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not'.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ J. Owen, 'The Polls and Newspaper Appraisal of the Suez Crisis', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 21/3 (1957), 353.

⁴⁵ Thorpe, *Supermac*, 439–48.

⁴⁶ Cited in A. N. Wilson, 'The Last Great Dandy', *The Telegraph*, 9 March 2003.

Imperial Brexit and the failure of Britain's Europe



For hard-core Brexiteers the EU is an ‘institution rooted in the past and is proving incapable of reforming to meet the big technology, demographic and economic challenges of our time’.⁴⁷ On the other hand, they believe Britain, with a glorious history of exporting ‘democratic self-government which has brought prosperity and peace to millions’, will ‘like the Americans . . . become an exemplar of what an inclusive, open and innovative democracy can achieve’.⁴⁸

Whatever the veracity of such a view (and the historical ironies are too numerous to consider in detail), the vista portrayed by Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove is a continuation of a long tradition of viewing Europe (and the world) through the prism of a Britain defined by its history. Or, as highlighted in sections 2 and 3 above, more precisely through a form of historical nostalgia based on selective memory. This is an outlook that simply discounts the negative implications of leaving the EU in favour of a largely unspecified view of Britain as a global power, a power based on a clear sense of institutional continuity and political stability.

This ‘global’ vision of a British economy long pre-dates the Brexit referendum campaign and indeed the accession of Britain to the then EEC in 1973. Seen from this longer-term perspective, the result of the 2016 referendum marked not a sudden lurch to isolationism for Britain, but rather the realisation of this historical vision which has largely underpinned Britain’s conditional engagement with the EU since 1973. This vision also supports the view that Britain’s failure to reshape the EU to its own free-trading, small-government, Atlanticist preferences, rendered an eventual movement towards Brexit inevitable.

For hard-line Brexiteers the stability represented by their idealised view of Britain’s history resulted in a ‘sense of continuity which often bleeds into a certain idea of separateness, however, of an at best semi-detached attitude towards Europe’.⁴⁹ This feeling is consistent with the widely viewed status of Britain as an ‘awkward partner’ in the EU.⁵⁰ Yet, the ultimate success of the Brexit campaign in 2016 required more than an idealised, selective view of history. It also required three further contagions which allowed this globalist, imperial vision of Britain to influence public discourse. First was an acceptance that Britain had failed to

⁴⁷ P. Apps, ‘EU Referendum: Michael Gove’s Full Statement on Why He Is Backing Brexit’, *The Independent*, 20 February 2016.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Otte, ‘Brexit, History and Identity’.

⁵⁰ S. George, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).



create a 'British Europe' out of the wider European integration process. Second was an overriding sense of economic crisis which triggered an increased appetite to challenge long-standing political norms, regardless of the economic or social costs.⁵¹ Third was an interrelated vision of British decline—or declinism—which holds economic nationalism as the answer to Britain's (perceived) reducing role in global affairs and the world economy. This concept was reinforced by a fatalist view of the EU.

The failure to build a British Europe

It is not a coincidence that Margaret Thatcher devoted the first section of her 1988 speech in Bruges to a historical remembering of Anglo-Continental ties.⁵² For London, the plan was always to reshape the EU as an economic driver of growth based on the single market, Atlanticism and global trade. For Thatcher, this represented an alternative to the Continental model, which would suppress nationhood and concentrate power 'at the centre of a European conglomerate'.⁵³ This concept of Britain reshaping Europe, of Britain leading a reformed EU, remained the dominant mantra of all prime ministers from Thatcher to Cameron.

Thatcher's speech, although not based on a specific imperial narrative, clearly sets out an alternative Anglo-Saxon vision of an EU run *by* nation states *for* nation states. It was to be a union 'run by Britain, France and Germany. In other words it should be intergovernmental'.⁵⁴ This vision is not based on empire, but is 'of' empire. It seeks to utilise Britain's experience of global hegemony to, in effect, manage the power of Europe with her traditional Continental rivals. Britain clearly understood, almost immediately, that the Treaty of Rome represented 'the kind of European structure which we have repeatedly, throughout our history gone to war to prevent'. The obvious solution, or the 'best way of averting such dangers is to get on board if we can to try to change the best laws of course'.⁵⁵

⁵¹ J. Hopkin, 'Market Fundamentalism, Economic Nationalism and Britain's Exit from the European Union', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19/3 (2017), 465–78.

⁵² M. Thatcher, 'Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech")', Bruges, 20 September 1988.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ S. Wall, 'Britain and Europe', *The Political Quarterly* 83/2 (April–June 2012), 331.

⁵⁵ Wall, 'Britain and Europe', citing C. O'Neill in 1964, 327.



This concept of Britain shaping and reforming the EU also feeds directly from the fountain of British exceptionalism that is implicit in prevailing Brexit debates. Historically this encompasses a conception of British history stretching back thousands of years (Thatcher in Bruges began with the Romans) which emphasises British differentiation from Continental Europe.⁵⁶ This view is based on the key principles of emphasising Britain as an exceptional power, the global strength of Britain vis-à-vis Continental Europe, and the view of the EU as a sclerotic and ultimately doomed entity. This vision of Britain as being essential to ensuring the success of the EU is based on a deeply arrogant view of British superiority. It is a view which holds that ‘Brussels elites’ need help, ‘but like alcoholics, they also need to realise the utter wretchedness of their condition before they ask for it. Continental Europe, unfortunately, has much further to fall before it can rise again’.⁵⁷ Through this prism the apparent British idyll of stable governmental and social harmony offers the obvious solution to those hapless Continentals.⁵⁸

Ultimately, however, Britain’s vision for Europe failed. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 followed by German reunification and the need for a new Franco-German understanding changed the rules of the game.⁵⁹ The subsequent moves towards Economic and Monetary Union in the mid-1990s and the resultant British opt-out can be viewed as the first steps in the slow inexorable march to Brexit. It is also correct to view the financial crisis of 2008, and the economic and political crises of the following decade as ‘putting a time-bomb under the sustainability of Britain’s membership of the EU’.⁶⁰ The significance of this failure of ‘British Europe’ was dramatically reinforced by the second contagion, which amplified the hard-line Brexiteers’ globalist British message, namely an all-encompassing feeling of economic and social crisis.

⁵⁶ B. Simms, ‘A New Balance of Power’, *New Statesman* 145/5322 (July 2016), 26–9.

⁵⁷ Simms, ‘A New Balance of Power’, 28

⁵⁸ B. Simms, ‘Why We Need a British Europe, Not a European Britain’, *New Statesman* 144/5269 (July 2015), 24–9.

⁵⁹ Wall, ‘Britain and Europe’, 325–8.

⁶⁰ H. Thompson, ‘Inevitability and Contingency: The Political Economy of Brexit’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19/3 (2017), 446.



Economic crisis

The purpose of this paper is not to review the impact of the global economic crisis of 2007/8 on Britain. Yet, it is important to highlight that Britain continues to be deeply affected by what Cribb and Johnson correctly refer to as the remarkable ‘persistence of its effects’.⁶¹ The relatively slow economic recovery evident since 2011 has resulted in British national debt increasing from 52.6% in 2009/10 to 85.8% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017/18. Britain’s annual deficit peaked at 10% of GDP in 2009/10 and remained at 2% in 2017/18.⁶² The persistence of these effects has contributed to widely held perceptions of increased inequality and declining public services. In this context, it is not surprising that the British Labour Party’s 2017 election manifesto was entitled ‘for the many, not the few’.

In a political economy context, it is clear that the oxygen feeding the fire of the hard-line Brexiteers’ approach is neither the EU’s competences, nor the size of London’s budget contributions to Brussels. In fact, the fuel is the much more systemic anti-elite revolt arising from the 2008 global financial crisis (potently combined with a patriotic historic reimagining). In this mix, the established consensus-driven model of European integration was always a likely target and one made more attainable due to the widely perceived incompatibility of Britain’s economic realities with membership of the EU.⁶³ It is therefore unsurprising that the core anti-EU vote in Britain rose from 15% to 30% between 2006 and 2012.⁶⁴

⁶¹ J. Cribb and P. Johnson, ‘10 Years on—Have We Recovered from the Financial Crisis?’, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 12 September 2018.

⁶² UK, Office for National Statistics, ‘UK Government Debt and Deficit: March 2018’, July 2018.

⁶³ Thompson, ‘The Political Economy of Brexit’, 434–49.

⁶⁴ K. Swales, *Understanding the Leave Vote*, NatCen Social Research, 2017, 4.



The decline of global Britain

The third contagion which facilitated the amplification of the hard-line Brexiteers' narrative is a mutated form of declinism which is a populist critique of the British elite and an important expression of anti-liberal nationalism.⁶⁵ Declinism—as classically expressed in a British context since at least the early 1900s—views Britain as falling behind its key competitors (usually Germany) in terms of economic growth and global influence. It views the British state, the structure of the economy, cultural norms and even key institutions such as the Bank of England as contributing to a wider national failure underpinning Britain's relative decline.⁶⁶

Although hard-line Brexiteers have attempted to place British decline as a 'core anti-Brexit sentiment', in reality a form of declinism is a key element of the hard-line Brexiteers' historical vision.⁶⁷ For Brexiteers, the perceived British decline of the second half of the twentieth century is fundamentally linked with membership of the EU. In this view, it is the EU's technocratic, sclerotic, bloated administrative apparatus that is holding back Britain from reigniting its global role and economic potential. It is this opinion of the EU which was amplified (for Brexiteers) by the struggles of Brussels to contain the economic shocks evident since 2007 and the subsequent migration crisis.

This specific Brexiteer vision is based not on Britain being held back by its domestic weaknesses—as viewed in classical declinism—but rather on Britain being dragged down the declinist path by a fatally wounded and ultimately damned EU. Thus, freed from Brussels, Britain can literally reshape her own destiny. Yet, as with broader historical narratives, Brexiteers' use of the phrase 'declining Britain' is a clear mutation of declinist meaning and has been shaped selectively to appeal to the broadest canvas of economic nationalism.

For example, declinism has historically viewed the British Empire as a drag on the economic progress of

⁶⁵ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 389.

⁶⁶ R. English and M. Kenny, 'British Decline or the Politics of Declinism', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1/2 (1999), 252–66.

⁶⁷ R. Tombs, 'The Myth of Britain's Decline', *The Spectator*, 8 July 2017.



Britain in the twentieth century. It was thus a policy choice which distracted attention from a more scientific vision of the future. This imperial preference, combined with an unnecessary focus on maintaining the value of sterling and defence expenditure, fed directly into Britain's relative weakness since 1900.⁶⁸ However, as highlighted in Sections 2 and 3, for Brexiteers, the Empire has become a symbol, not of British decline, but of how British influence could once again expand on a global stage in a post-EU environment. In this context, it is the EU that is making Britain weak and it is a rebadged Empire/Commonwealth that will revitalise Britain.

The role of declinism and 'Empire' is easily dismissed as a type of historical nostalgia. But its importance as a key element of the hard-line Brexiteer historical approach should not be underestimated. British public opinion remains very favourable to narratives of Empire and influence.⁶⁹ Michael Gove's proposals, when education secretary, to formalise 'Empire' as part of the educational curriculum drew widespread condemnation from eminent historians who viewed it as 'a little England version of our national past', full of 'patriotic stocking-fillers so beloved of traditionalists'.⁷⁰ In reality, declinism, as utilised by hard-line Brexiteers, should be viewed as 'one of the last vestiges of imperial grandeur'.⁷¹

Historical narratives and declinism in the 2016 referendum

From research analysing the 2016 referendum result it is evident that both these contagions—economic hardship and a declining view of Britain's prospects—coalesced around the wider hard Brexit historical narrative. Two specific strands of this debate are noteworthy in the context of this paper. First is the issue of British, particularly English, identity, and the feeling that the general situation in Britain has worsened over

⁶⁸ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 576, footnote 30.

⁶⁹ J. Stone, 'British People Are Proud of Colonialism and the British Empire, Poll Finds', *The Independent*, 19 January 2016.

⁷⁰ A. Claeys, 'Gove's Proposed History in Curriculum Forgets That We Live in 2013, Not the 1950s' *Huffington Post*, 22 April 2013.

⁷¹ D. Edgerton, 'The Decline of Declinism', *Business History Review* 71/2 (Summer 1997), 201.



the past decades. Second is the related issue of economic hardship and the perception that the overall financial situation has plateaued, or has actually deteriorated in recent times for those identifying themselves as ‘working class’.⁷²

While the concept of the ‘just about managing’ in society is not unique to Britain, the referendum result highlighted that this perception of decline—both in terms of identity and economics—can be harnessed to a wider national feeling. These sentiments, when combined with a selective historical narrative emphasising past imperial greatness, resulted in a national movement which broke down traditional party-political, social-class and geographical affiliations.

For example, the groups most likely to have voted Leave in 2016 were (1) those finding it difficult to manage financially or just about getting by, (2) those who believed Britain had got a lot worse in the last 10 years, (3) those who thought things had got worse for them relative to other people, (4) those who perceive themselves as working class and (5) those who see themselves as English more than British.⁷³ The feeling of relative economic decline was further amplified by a Leave vote heavily skewed towards an older age demographic.⁷⁴ This analysis supports the widely held view that the economic focus of the Remain campaign was ineffective, with poor resonance among the majority of voters.

This clear declinist view, coupled with the hard-line Brexiteer narrative of a reimagined, glorious imperial history, combined to reshape a sizeable portion of the British electoral landscape. It was not party politics or historical trends which underlay 2016 voting patterns, but rather the clear perception of economic disadvantage and societal decline. Recent research indicates that Labour Party support in Britain is increasingly concentrated in London and major cities, in areas of increasing ethnic diversity and in places with the highest proportion of young adults.⁷⁵ Yet, in areas most commonly defined as ‘working class’ there has been a noticeable swing to the Conservatives since 2005.⁷⁶ These were all trends amplified in the 2016 referendum results.

⁷² Swales, *Understanding the Leave Vote*, 7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ O. Bailey and L. Baston, *For the Many?* Fabian Society, Fabian Policy Report (August 2018), executive summary.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

**Britain as the
'King Lear of the
diplomatic world'⁷⁷**



Notwithstanding the fragmented nature of domestic British politics since 2016, the underlying historical reasoning of hard-line Brexiteers—‘taking back control’—remains a potent force in public discourse. The hard-line Brexiteer nirvana—‘we can be the ‘heroes of Europe’ by voting to leave—continues to stand as a policy objective for a significant portion of the British electorate (and the Westminster Parliament).

For those seeking to understand the Brexit debate in Britain, it is important to acknowledge that history—or rather a certain Eurosceptic Tory interpretation of British and Imperial history—played a key role in sustaining the momentum for Brexit, both during and after the 2016 referendum. This research has identified four distinct, but closely interlinked, historical narratives which combined together to create a vision of British history that is, at its very core, populist and deeply nationalistic.

Although often dismissed as simple historical nostalgia, the self-perception of Britain’s position in 1940 (‘Britain’s finest hour’), the sense of relative decline compared to Germany (‘in 1945 one country lost World War 2. It was us.’), the understanding of Britain’s role in the Anglo-American relationship (‘friends with benefits’), and British misunderstandings about the motivations and objectives of the EU (‘this is not what we signed up for’) are central to the Brexiteers’ conception of a globalist Britain reasserting her historical global leadership.

The resonance of these historical narratives continues to be amplified by the failure of Britain to mould the European integration process to her design. For hard-line Brexiteers, Thatcher’s dystopian view—‘we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at European level’—is the odious reality holding back a great, globalist, trading Britain. This vision, although not based on empire, is ‘of’ empire. It seeks to utilise Britain’s experience of global hegemony to, in effect, manage the power of Europe with her traditional Continental rivals rather than through European institutions. In this context, Brexit is the inevitable result of the evolution of the EU, starting with the fall of the Soviet Union and German reunification.

The Brexit debate since 2016, therefore, can be seen as the triumph of a misrepresented and selective view of British Imperial history and an unbending view of the primacy of nation states. These are narratives which were combined (quite quickly and unpredictably) with a rise in economic nationalism and populism

⁷⁷ Saunders, ‘Britain Must Rid Itself of the Delusion’.



stimulated by the global economic crisis that commenced in 2007. This combination, in turn, challenged long-established political norms such as Britain's membership of the EU. These were challenges that were largely based on a mutated form of British declinism and a fatalist view of the EU.

This almost Darwinian view of the future—Britain or Europe—ensures that at the heart of the hard Brexit vision remains a vision of Imperial Britain—great, unique and standing alone. While it is easy to characterise this view as naïve and delusional, it continues to be used effectively by those seeking a return to what Richard Overy has accurately described as ‘a narrow self-interest . . . a wish to wallow in a sentimental and ahistorical image of Britain's past’.⁷⁸

‘You cannot free yourself from imaginary oppression’⁷⁹

What conclusions can our historical analysis draw for the future of the UK relationship with the EU? Firstly, it is important to understand—almost counterintuitively—that Brexit is not fundamentally about Europe. Rather the debate within Britain is of a much more existential type. It is an example of a fragmented political system (itself reflecting a growing polarisation in society) attempting to deal belatedly with a century of rapid social, economic, political and cultural change. It is the Britain of today still struggling to shed the deeply held historical prejudices of an imperial past.

Second, Britain today—from the gleaming towers of the City of London to the rusting coalfields of the Welsh valleys—is a microcosm of the challenges facing all post-colonial powers in transitioning to equal partners in a multipolar world. But while France and Germany both see European integration as the mechanism to secure peace and maximise their global role, Britain's involvement in the EU is a torturous example of ‘British leadership’ still seeking a home.

⁷⁸ R. Overy, ‘Remain’, *History Today*, 18 May 2016.



In this context, Brexit was (is) destined to occur owing to Britain's impossible conditions for being a member of a community-based, compromise-led, multinational EU. It is correct from historical and political economy perspectives to view Brexit as an inevitability. The example of British attitudes towards the Irish border question since 2016 explicitly highlights London's misunderstandings of how the EU works at a most fundamental level. It shows a deep distrust of EU institutions and the role they play in protecting the interests of all its member states, even small island states that once (reluctantly) formed part of the British Empire.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that Brexit will actually undermine the 'global Britain' model to which the hard-line Brexiteers ascribe. In addition, leaving the EU will compromise the legacy of Britain's remarkable achievement in the twentieth century of transitioning from a worldwide empire to an open global economy and key driver of the EU's single market project. In the context of events since 2016, it is clear that Britain should not seek to remain (or gain re-admittance) as a full member of the EU. Rather Britain's historical self-conception is more conducive to a looser, yet clearly defined relationship with the EU based on shared political, economic and security interests. Such an arrangement—a bespoke Anglo-Continental compact—is more consistent with Britain's political realities and accepted historical narratives. It will also better preserve the integrity of the EU's internal operations, which since 2016 have remained intertwined with internal British self-flagellation.

Two further conclusions, based on historical analysis, are relevant for Britain in the medium term. First, Brexit—soft or hard, now or in the future—will not necessarily redraw the political map of Britain in the long term as is now often predicted. Rather, it is likely that domestic socio-economic issues will quickly return to the forefront of British debates. Second, regardless of the perceived shortcomings in the Conservative Party approach to the Brexit negotiations since 2016, it is unlikely that this will seriously impact their electoral performance in upcoming general elections, nor diminish their appeal to large segments of the British public.

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