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Sneak Peek:

Rule Britannia: From Brexit to the end of Empire

By Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson

Brexit has been a disaster with silver linings. The process of trying to leave the EU and the end result could finally jolt the British elite out of their superior complacency, and thereby make the country a fairer and more humane place. We easily forget that on 14 November 2011, David Cameron told the guests at the annual Lord Mayor's Banquet in London that he had 'an opportunity to begin to refashion the EU so it better serves this nation's interests...' Such arrogance and ignorance!

Things fall apart when empires crumble – most severely at the heart of that former empire, in the imperial capital city, and then across the home country. Rediscovery is attempted again and again, until eventually the former heart of the empire becomes reconciled with its new fate. It has always been this way and yet we rarely try to learn much from the fate of past empires. This time, we think, things are different. They are not. This time we are told that we will rebuild the empire. We will not. Things fall apart. It's just a stage that the British are going to have to get through.

British failings are understandable, because the British have recently ruled over the majority of the known world. Every group of people that has ever done this has taken time to adapt to no longer being superior. And Britain's leaders are mostly – intellectually or literally – descended from some of the most effective despots the world has ever known. They know how to pull the wool over people's eyes, lie and hold on to power for as long as they can. The national narcissism required to rule an empire does not dissipate overnight. But the benefit of not growing up under the weight of such sad misconceptions is that we finally see through the men (and they are almost all men) who have so recently been trying so hard to lead us out of Europe.

We will make a prophecy here. They do not yet know it, but what the Brexiteers have actually sped us towards is the final whimper of the old ideal of the British Empire. Before Brexit, they could harbour their fantasies of national superiority – unshackled from the EU, where

Britain (or at least they) would be both richer and freer. Now they have called their own bluff and are about to be found out.

The future is bright and the geography is clear. Partly as a result of Brexit, the next generation will soon have a far better idea of the sins, misconceptions and ignorance of their fathers, and hence will be relieved when the UK ceases to be a significant military power. It is for the next generation to make Britain decent, to make Britannia humane, and to consign the empire's triumphant songs to history. The rest of the world knows what the British are going through and why Britain has an identity crisis. It is just the British, mainly older white people in Britain, who so often still don't understand it.

A future beyond empire will be very different and created in response to the final mistakes of the old colonial thinkers. This has to occur whether the country is in or out of the EU. The British don't have to fail, but they do need to stop claiming that they are so 'Great' and insisting that they have a right to be considered a top dog, a 'Tier 1' military power that can boss and bully 'lesser nations' with nuclear weapons to supposedly prove their status. And property can no longer be sacrosanct. British property law can be changed. That alone would frighten off overseas investors who buy homes to leave empty in the belief that they will never be seized for the general good. Just talking about the need for requisition will help.

There are still many things the four nations of the UK can offer to the world, even if some of them are very different from the imperial ideas of dominating foreign countries, asserting the pre-eminence of property rights over human rights, and exploiting the labour of others.

One thing is certain: it will not make Britain great to become even more of a tax haven, a small offshore island where rich men and women, global corporations and dodgy businesses are encouraged to park their money. Neither is it in the interests of the rest of the world, and especially the rest of Europe, to allow this to happen. Fortunately, it is also not in the interest of 99.9 per cent of UK residents. Why should commuters on Virgin trains pay exorbitant fares to travel to work, while Richard Branson puts his share of the proceeds into overseas tax havens and doesn't even volunteer his riches to help rebuild hurricane-destroyed houses on the Caribbean island where he so often lives?

Britain is impoverished by many who will do anything possible to avoid paying tax, seeing it as a great evil when in fact it is a massive public good. The current tax system is deliberately full of loopholes, and there are armies of largely unaccountable accountants to help the wealthy exploit those loopholes. It would be great if the people of Britain could be decently fed, from local farmers and fishermen rewarded for expanding their efforts and overseas food trade, properly regulated. Instead, we have the shameful spectacle of hungry people in a rich country collecting from foodbanks.

Often, apologists for the state of the UK say, 'But we have such good charities!' That is not something that makes for a Great Britain, let alone a United Kingdom. With Brexit, whether soft, medium or hard, this can all end. Even a much poorer state than the UK need have no recourse to foodbanks and there are many poorer countries that have managed this. The British elite could have ended the shame of having

to beg for food without resorting to Brexit, but perhaps they needed the shock to shake them out of their fitful slumber? As the New York Times explained on November 4th 2017:

Britain is undergoing a full-blown identity crisis. It is a ‘hollowed-out country,’ ‘ill at ease with itself,’ ‘deeply provincial,’ engaged in a ‘controlled suicide,’ say puzzled experts. And these are Britain’s friends ... The 19th-century myth of Britain as the ‘workshop of the world,’ a doughty Protestant nation surrounded by Catholics with an empire on which the sun never set, confronted a post-World War II reality, when a lot of these tales stopped being true ... Confused and divided, Britain no longer has an agreed-upon national narrative, said Charles Grant [director and trustee of the British Council from 2002 to 2008]... ‘Everywhere I go ... people are asking “What’s wrong with your country?”’

An extract from the book:
Rule Britannia: From Brexit to the end of Empire
By Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, January 2019

