

In Search of British Exceptionalism Post-Brexit

Written by Srdjan Vucetic

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SRDJAN VUCETIC, DEC 22 2020

“We are no longer a great power. We will never be so again,” declared Sir John Major on November 9, 2020 at Middle Temple in London. An outspoken critic of Brexit – the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union – the former Conservative prime minister warned of a “brutal” future, which he blamed on the negotiating “failures” of the Conservative government of Boris Johnson: “Because of our bombast, our blustering, our threats and our inflexibility – our trade will be less profitable, our Treasury poorer, our jobs fewer, and our future less prosperous.” Furthermore, Brexit increased the “risk of breaking up the UK by increased support for Scotland to leave the Union, and Northern Ireland to unite with the South.” But rather than ending on a wholly pessimistic note, Major proposed a foreign policy recalibration. “Global Britain” – a policy (slogan) introduced by Johnson’s predecessor, Theresa May – was a good idea, assuming, he said, “we” forswear the fantasy of “British exceptionalism.”

What is this fantasy about, and where does it come from? According to scholars such as Oliver Daddow, British exceptionalism emerged at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when Britain’s elites opted for a policy of “limited liability” to Europe as a means of freeing up resources for empire-building and free trade. To garner support for this policy, they constructed and sustained various “island stories.” Their moral, however, was always the same: “we” are not, and could not possibly be, “just” another European nation. Some members of said elite were in fact rather specific: not “a Spain” (Sir Oswald Mosely, at various points in the interwar period), not “another Netherlands” (Harold Macmillan, speaking as Chancellor of the Exchequer during the Suez Crisis), not “another Belgium” (more than a few politicians, from Lord Curzon in 1908 to the current era), and not “sort of poor man’s Sweden” (the governor of Aden Sir Charles Johnston in 1963). The exception to prove the rule was France, of course so long as it managed to sustain its great power bona fides. Here is Sir Malcolm Rifkind, writing in 2010: “The question for the UK and its Conservative led Government is whether it wishes to retain a global approach, or resign itself to the lesser status. Is it still prepared to act like France, or is it content to have influence comparable with that of Spain?”

One of the most influential island stories of all time – at least in foreign policy – is associated with Winston Churchill. “We,” he declared at the 1948 Conservative Party conference in Llandudno, are the crucial link between the “three great circles among the free nations and democracies.” By which he meant “the British Commonwealth and Empire,” “the English-speaking world,” and “United Europe” – in that specific order. Churchill then added: “We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps of the airways also, we have the opportunity of joining them all together.”

Twenty years later, as the winds of decolonization blew into British lives and French President Charles de Gaulle twice vetoed the UK’s bid to join the Common Market, this and similar stories had to be revised. Yet, most revisions were minor, such that exceptionalist beliefs persisted. Going back to Daddow, the “turn to Europe” never compelled the ruling elites to promote a more European discourse of national identity. On the contrary, most if not all of them came to learn from Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherites that “Euroscepticism” is a technology of rule, not a political stance. This development, Daddow goes on to suggest, can help us understand the run up and outcome of the 2016 referendum: “Asking the people to accept the logic of Eurosceptic discourse but vote to Remain was a strange contract: some might say counter-intuitive bordering on the illogical.”

Implicit in this stylized history is a conception of national politics in which elites project specific ideas about the nation onto the “masses.” My research on British exceptionalism, in contrast, started from a premise that national identities

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and identifications are constituted through intersubjective, culturally rooted, “everyday” meaning-making processes that involve civil society more broadly. On this view, exceptionalist notions have strongest political consequences when they become national “common sense”, that is, when they are discursively formulated as such not only among elites, but also “vertically,” meaning between elites and masses.

To get at British exceptionalism this way, I led a team of discourse analysts who helped me read political speeches, newspapers, high school history textbooks, novels and movies, our eyes trained on all phrases that invoked “Britishness,” “Englishness,” and all that. We did so in six ten-year intervals, from 1950 to 2010, and then for good measure also in the year 2015, thus comparing and contrasting findings from across the colonial, Cold War, post-Cold War, and pre-Brexit vote contexts. However, rather than covering “four nations,” we remained focused on England, the primary justification being England’s centrality for the constitution and identity formation of the so-called “national UK.”

Here I can report only some findings of relevance. The first one is that there was no single, overwhelming, exceptionalist discourse, but that elements of exceptionalism permeated a whole range of English/British ideas of who they are, were, or wish to become. “Europe” was “over there,” much more distant than “America,” and for that matter the rest of the English-speaking world, to use Churchill’s parlance. Next, while elite and masses alike usually agreed that their country was in decline – this was most evident in 1980, followed by the years 1970 and 2010 – very few texts in the entire archive rejected the idea of global power. This was in fact consistently one of the most important ways people understood what it meant to be British. In fact, whatever the context, everyday discourses of Britishness tended to position “Britain” as somehow exceptional.

If this is right, then “national identity” may well be another reason why successive governments in London stayed the course on a global great power foreign policy. Only two prime ministers count as *possible* exceptions. One is Edward “Ted” Heath, a Tory prime minister from 1970 to 1974, best known, in addition to his “pro-Europe” views, for his working-class origins, idiosyncratic views, and declaring a record five states of emergency. The other is Harry Perkins, the fictional protagonist of *A Very British Coup*, a beloved 1982 novel by (now retired) Labour Left politician Chris Mullin. The adjective “possible” is key, however. Heath, as both scholars and his contemporaries like to point out, had no intention of ever pursuing a “smaller” foreign policy. As for Perkins, a working-class Socialist whom some contemporary readings have compared to Labour’s former leader Jeremy Corbyn, he simply never stood a chance. Indeed, his radical foreign policy ideas – withdraw from NATO, discontinue Trident, chuck out the American bases – is why he gets toppled in the eponymous coup.

Will Brexit usher in a less ambitious foreign policy, though? The answer in Mullin’s sequel novel, *The Friends of Harry Perkins*, is “maybe”. Published in 2019, the book picks up the original plot and takes it into the post-Brexit 2020s, when the UK is grappling with countless problems. America is sending a fleet to fight China in support of Japan. Germany, with India’s support, is ready to take the UK’s United Nations Security Council seat. With the economy “going from bad to worse” – and the dirty politics of scapegoating becoming more and more tiresome – the British voters are beginning to look for new options: a Labour prime minister and a “Brexit reversal”.

For the time being, however, the UK’s actual leadership remains intensely committed to a global approach. A mere ten days after Major’s Middle Temple speech, Prime Minister Johnson made a statement in the House of Commons announcing the largest military spending boost since the Cold War. The statement can be read as an outstanding example of what Major calls “our bombast, our blustering.” In it, Johnson invokes “global influence” twice, vows “to end the era of retreat,” and likens his budget increase to some of the most famous foreign policy decisions made by Churchill and Thatcher, as well as Labour’s Clement Attlee. “In each case, Britain tipped the scales of history and did immense good for the world. Now we have a chance to follow in this great tradition.” All this and more, without once mentioning either “final” Brexit talks or the UK’s post-Covid finances.

Reading Major’s and Johnson’s speeches side by side is even more revelatory. Here is another quote from the former: “If we cannot again be a great power, we can be a great example. If we cannot compel, we can influence. We can build up our soft power to sustain our profile...” Prima facie, this is a disagreement: in contrast to Johnson, Major wants to see a Britain that prioritizes leadership by example over that muscle. Yet this disagreement is over tactics,

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not strategy, for both speakers are ultimately interested in the idea and practice of global influence. On a more fundamental level, then, Major's is not so much a repudiation of British exceptionalism as it is its mainstream expression. So mainstream, in fact, that we should expect to see more of it even in the trying months ahead.

About the author:

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