

# After Brexit

## The Eurosceptic dream of an Anglosphere

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The EU referendum will be a battle between competing visions of Britain's place in the world. **Michael Kenny** and **Nick Pearce** warn that the concept of an Anglosphere – an unlikely coalition of English-speaking countries, and a potent element of Eurosceptics' vision of post-EU Britain – demands an equally optimistic rebuttal from pro-Europeans.

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The starting gun has been fired in the referendum campaign on whether the UK should leave the EU. A central challenge for Eurosceptic supporters of Brexit is how to articulate a vision of a prosperous, optimistic future for the UK outside the EU. Conversely, supporters of staying in need to show why Britain is stronger inside the Union, and why leaving it would be risky. Much of this hangs on bread-and-butter questions about jobs and living standards, and the extent to which the prime minister's reform package addresses public concerns about immigration and democratic control over EU institutions. However, bigger questions about Britain's identity and place in the world loom large, too.

### EVER-WIDENING CIRCLES: THE BIRTH OF THE ANGLOSPHERE

In the last couple of decades, Eurosceptics have developed the idea that Britain's future lies with a group of 'Anglosphere' countries, not with a union of European states. At the core of this Anglosphere are the 'five eyes' countries (so-called because of intelligence co-operation) of the UK, US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Each, it is argued, share a common history, language and political culture: liberal, protestant, free-market, democratic and English-speaking. While the net is sometimes cast wider to encompass Commonwealth countries and former British colonies, such as India, Singapore and Hong Kong, the emotional and political heart of the project resides in these 'five eyes' nations.

As this lineage suggests, the roots of the Anglosphere as a concept go back to 19th-century imperialist discourses, and more specifically in the idea of an Imperial Federation, which gained ground in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the British Empire came under pressure from rising nationalist and anti-colonialist forces. Federation, with an Imperial Parliament governing foreign, defence and trade policy, seemed an ideal solution for keeping dominions and colonies

happily inside the empire. The first world war put paid to this ambition, but the idea lived on in the concept of the Commonwealth.

As we explored in a recent essay for the *New Statesman*,<sup>1</sup> the Anglosphere returned as a central concept in Eurosceptic thinking in the 1980s, when Europhilia started to wane in the Conservative party and Thatcherism was in its ascendancy. American ideas were a major influence on the right of the party, particularly following the emergence of a powerful set of foundations, thinktanks and intellectuals in the UK that propounded arguments and ideas that were associated with the fledgling 'New Right'. In this climate, the Anglosphere came back to life as an alternative ambition to that of the Europhiles, advanced by a powerful alliance of global media moguls (Conrad Black, in particular), outspoken politicians, well-known commentators and intellectual outriders, who all shared an insurgent ideological agenda and a strong sense of disgruntlement with the direction and character of mainstream conservatism.

Later, in his major work, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*,<sup>2</sup> the historian Robert Conquest argued that the political arrangements of the west were all increasingly deficient, the EU included. His answer was 'a more fruitful unity' between the Anglosphere nations. In a speech to the English-Speaking Union in New York in 1999, Margaret Thatcher endorsed Conquest's vision, noting how such an alliance would 'redefine the political landscape'. What appealed most was the prospect of the UK finding an alliance founded upon deep, shared values – the antithesis of the position it faced in Europe.

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## UNCOMMON CURRENCY: THE ANGLOSPHERE CAPTURES CONSERVATIVE IMAGINATIONS

The idea of the Anglosphere as an alternative to the European Union gained ground among conservatives in their New Labour-era wilderness years, when transatlantic dialogue and trips down-under kept their hopes of ideological revival alive. It was given further oxygen by the neoconservative coalition of the willing stitched together for the invasion of Iraq, which seemed to demonstrate the Anglosphere's potency as an geopolitical organising ideal, in contrast to mainstream hostility to the war in Europe. By the time of the 2010 election, the Anglosphere had become common currency in conservative circles, name-checked by leading centre-right thinkers like David Willetts, as well as Eurosceptic luminaries such as Dan Hannan MEP, who devoted a book and numerous blogs to the subject.

As foreign secretary, William Hague sought to strengthen ties between the Anglosphere countries, despite the Obama presidency's indifference to the idea. After leaving the cabinet, the leading Eurosceptic Owen Patterson gave a lengthy speech in the US on the subject of an Anglospheric global alliance for free trade and security. He could expect a sympathetic hearing

1 Kenny M and Pearce N (2015) 'The Rise of the Anglosphere: How the Right Dreamed Up a New World Order', *New Statesman*, 10 February 2015. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/02/rise-anglosphere-how-right-dreamed-new-conservative-world-order>

2 Conquest R (1999) *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, WW Norton & Company.

in Republican circles, if not the White House. In its 2015 election manifesto, the UK Independence Party (Ukip) praised the Anglosphere as a ‘global community’ of which the UK was a key part. More recently, David Davis MP has appealed to the Anglosphere as the terrain for a new ‘global project’. After Brexit, he argued, the UK should become more like Canada, not Norway or Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>

Economic stagnation in the eurozone has given a superficial gloss to claims that the UK would do better expanding its trade with the Commonwealth than remaining inside the EU. For the free-market right, adding former British colonies and city states to the Anglosphere has a further appeal: the fast-growing Asian economies have the appearance of mirror images of neoliberal Anglo-Saxon ones, unencumbered by large welfare states, strong trade unions or high taxes. Reunited with the Anglosphere and trading with Asia, Britannia would be simultaneously unchained from Europe *and* social democracy.

### THE COMING REFERENDUM AND AN ‘ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARY HORIZON’

These geopolitical and economic claims are met with derision in centrist political circles. For international relations realists, the idea of an Anglosphere alliance barely merits a straight face, let alone serious consideration. And it is beyond question that the US and Canada, let alone India, would dismiss the idea of a geopolitical alliance of English-speaking countries as an alternative to existing global structures as fanciful. Indeed, they question why the UK should be entertaining leaving the EU at all.

But the Anglosphere’s potency is ideological, not geopolitical. It functions as an imaginary horizon for a Eurosceptic worldview of Britain after Brexit, uniting the UK with a global trading future as well as a ‘sceptered isle’ past. It registers nostalgia, but also energy: Britain would be liberated to march on the world stage again, freed from sclerotic, conformist Europe and reanimated by the animal spirits that once gave it an empire. Thus it defends the Eurosceptic flank where it is most vulnerable – rebutting the charge that it wants to take Britain back to the 1950s, by delving even deeper into our island story and casting it forward into the 21st century. For the Carswell and Cummings factions in the Brexit camp, it helps to furnish precisely the optimistic, expansive account of Britain’s economic future they believe stands the only chance of winning the referendum.

This should give pro-Europeans pause for thought. The ‘Remain’ campaign is currently premised largely on the risks of Brexit (or ‘Project Fear’ as it is known to its detractors). It needs an optimistic account of Britain’s future in the world – one that is pursued with the European Union, not outside of it. Yet globalisation currently has a bad press, and in the face of insecurity and inequality, a New Labour formula of ‘globalisation plus good schools’ doesn’t cut much ice with working-class voters. For the campaign to

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3 Davis D (2016) ‘David Davis: Britain would be better off out of the EU – and here’s why’, ConservativeHome, 4 February 2016. <http://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2016/02/david-davis-britain-would-be-better-off-out-of-the-eu-and-heres-why.html>

develop its own version of Britain's identity and role in the world, beyond the fact of EU membership alone, is therefore a pressing task.

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