

Britain's role in the world: a conversation

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Britain's role in the world

Stephen Whitefield talks to Colin Hay about Britain's projection of its place in the world today, set in the context of the diminished sense of Britishness and the story of the long decline of the country itself

Stephen Whitefield: Colin, it is a great pleasure to be having this conversation with you. The question of Britain's place in the world is not a new one, but it has particular salience in present British, European and global circumstances. It strikes me that there can seldom have been a moment in the past when answers to this question were as poorly articulated and weakly held by such a broad array of political forces, even in the midst of a referendum campaign. It also strikes me that you are just the person to be asking. Your list of publications is full of appropriate books and articles that come at the issue from many different angles. In 2013, on *The Failure of Anglo-Liberal Capitalism* (Routledge); in 2015, on *The British Growth Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan); in 2014, on *The Legacy of Thatcherism* (Oxford University Press). I could go on and on.

Let me start by asking you to put yourself in context for our readers. Does the issue of Britain's role in the world matter to you in any kind of visceral personal way? And how would you say your academic and intellectual work to date engages with it?

Colin Hay: First, thank you Stephen. It is refreshing as a political scientist to be asked about how the things one writes about matter in a visceral and personal way. Of course they do, however much our professional lives lead us to have to hide that. In fact, I suspect I don't hide it very well! I now live in France and I think of myself as European, British and Scottish. But I would much prefer not to have to place those self-identifications in some kind of hierarchical order – nor, worse still, to have to choose between them.

So it concerns me greatly – indeed, viscerally – that British politics seems, with each passing day, to make it more and more difficult to be European, British and Scottish with ease, without compromise and without managing a complex array of growing tensions. I worry greatly about the possibility of Brexit – which, I think, is a very real threat. And I worry about it not because I think that a majority of British citizens wish for it, but because differential turnout levels effectively magnify the influence of those socio-economic groups that are both most Eurosceptic in their views and most likely to vote.

But I also worry about Britain's place in the world in a broader sense – and have done so for longer. As a political economist it strikes me that Britain and the US share, if not an enduring special relationship (that would seem to be over), but a certain special responsibility for the Anglo-liberal character of the

capitalism that led to the edge of the precipice in 2008. Those concerns endure today, not least because we do not appear to have moved very far from that precipice since 2008 (in part because we have not taken the responsibility seriously) – and the drop, now that we have been staring into the abyss for a while, looks very scary indeed.

SW: That opens a lot to discuss. Obviously, there is also a long narrative about national decline, and then revival most recently in the Thatcher period, hardly rejected by Blair. As you say, the dominant ideology in the UK bears much responsibility for the form of Anglo-American capitalism that for much of the period especially from the end of the Cold War to the financial crisis we worked to export. But it seems to me that there are very few now even in the Tory party who evangelise for it, far less wish the UK to take the lead in reforming the

EU in that direction. Rather, even if we stay in, leave the continent to its own devices – I worry deeply about the consequences of that for Europe.

But can we start by looking further back historically than the rise of Thatcherism or the end of the Cold War? I suppose there has never been political agreement on what Britain's place in the world should be. But on left and right and around the UK, can we say at least that there have been strong and coherent competing narratives that went with a sense of the country's great importance in and for the world? With a broad brush, how would you characterise them?

CH: That's difficult and I would not claim to be any sort of authority on these more historical issues. But you pose a fascinating question and one not asked enough, I think. What strikes me, reflecting on it now, is that Britain's projection of its place in the world today is a more frightened and timid one than it has perhaps ever been. That this is so is almost certainly in part a consequence of a much more diminished and fragile sense of Britishness itself. It is no longer clear what Britain or British identity is that one might project beyond Britain's shores; indeed, it is not clear that there exists a sense of Britishness capable of uniting those living within its shores. Brexit and the possibility of a second Scottish independence referendum afterwards are a manifestation of that wider anxiety and all of that, in turn, when set in a wider historical context can be seen as the latest episode of the story of Britain's long decline.

But what also strikes me is that, in the process of losing its sense of identity and the confidence to project whatever identity it did have internationally, Britain has gone in effect from being some kind of global public good provider (at times in a rather claustrophobically paternalistic way) to a much more simple exponent and proselytiser for market liberalism. That was certainly not the case under Thatcher – whose neo-conservatism was just as important as her neo-liberalism in determining her sense of Britain's place in the world. But it does appear to be the story since Thatcher. In a way, Britain's long-standing (market) liberalism has always been tempered by other things – conservatism, paternalism, even a certain ethical socialism on occasions. Today it is seems strangely untempered.

SW: Well, and as I say, even that we seem to do more timidly. Cameron carves out a special deal for the City but we hardly hear anyone these days promising that Britain will lead a coalition of the anti-bureaucratic, anti-regulatory forces of Europe for a new EU. We are close to signing up to TTIP but the old arguments of the benefits of trade liberalisation are not being made in its support. So, if we are left with nothing but market liberalism to underpin our narrative about Britain's place in the world, we are without much being said at all to legitimate what we do or don't do.

Yet, of course, we continue to project military power and “punch above our weight”. But is there a new argument for all that – and about all that – beginning to emerge in the post-crash world when other – if related – issues have become more salient?: climate change; migration; war, terrorism, security. There is plenty of denial and drawing up the drawbridges of narrow nationalism in response to these challenges. But it seems to me that no political forces – right, left or centre – in Britain as yet seem to have put together a successful response that has an internationalist core and which projects Britain's undoubted power on many dimensions – economic, military, cultural – to provide global leadership. I wonder why that is, especially for the left – supposing it is true. Is it because of the nature of the issues themselves? Because the centre-left is so tarnished by its association with neo-liberalism not to mention neo-conservatism that it has entirely lost a capacity to make convincing arguments? But I also wonder what the contours of an internationalist position that makes sense in responding to these growing challenges and makes use of Britain's undoubted power in the world should look like? And where and how will the case be made? I guess it is not going to be via our position to influence the EU, even if we stay in it.

CH: Sadly, I think your analysis is depressingly accurate. Insofar as Britain now has a consistent stance on an international stage it is surely a combination of two things. The first is the kind of default market liberalism that we have been talking about. It trumps, of course, practically every other consideration – acting, for instance, as a veto on the kind of global governance required to address climate change or financial market re-regu-

lation in response to the crisis. The effect is to turn Britain into a global veto player (albeit one which now often lacks the power to prove influential on its own). And the second is, of course, parochial special pleading! This is the story of Cameron's attempt to re-negotiate Britain's EU membership – the idea that Britain, somehow, deserves to enjoy all the market-liberal benefits of European integration without suffering any of the costs or, more importantly still, bearing any sense of collective responsibility.

It is not especially surprising that if this is Britain's stance on a European stage, it is no longer either interested in nor capable of projecting a positive and internationalist presence on a wider stage.

That a combination of national parochialism and market liberalism should come to define Britain's stance on a global stage is, of course, a dreadful

thing; that it should have come to have been accepted so timidly by the centre and the left in British politics is a tragedy. But it is not altogether surprising – and, for me, it has its origins in Blair's decision over Iraq. This was the moment when Labour, in particular, stopped placing ethical considerations (however conceived, however misconceived) above more narrowly instrumental imperatives. Liberal quietism is the new orthodoxy; indeed, it is the new consensus.

SW: Let me come back again to the nature of these “new” issues that now press because they seem to cut across both left and right and may make it harder to find a coherent way of thinking about Britain's role. On the right, forces of neo-liberalism retain their power and wealth, are increasingly divided about climate change – more and more of them see money-making opportunities in new green technologies – but the consequences of the wars they supported and the global economy they created have overwhelmed their ideological defences. On the left, the dream of pooled sovereignty to regulate capitalism and advance social rights has been equally undermined. It seems to me that only one political field has emerged to make sense of all this with growing menace. Populist authoritarianism – nationalist, anti-migrant, welfarist so long as support is offered to “our own people”, but not so threatening to the powerful that they should fear losing their wealth. This populist authoritarianism is taking many forms across the globe and each of them offers its own definition of its country's role in the world. Trumpism appears to be a rejection of the neo-cons' global reach and promises to put America first by cutting back on NATO and rejecting the huge edifice of post-War global trade. Putinism puts together elements of Russia's and Soviet pasts in a particularly toxic and weird yet expedient brew of nationalism with an internationalist dimension to define a place for Russia in the world today. Russia as messianic state in defence of Christian values; Russia as international strongman, ready to act when the weak West now cannot. We can get more parochial and inward looking with Orbán in Hungary where ideological battles are fought over long-lost tribes in Transylvania. And of course you will feel this very close to home in France with le Pen.

So, I want to ask you next about two things. First, can I just get a comparative benchmark for the questions we ask about Britain's role in the world? You live and work now in Paris. Are the French as concerned and confused about their role in the world as we are? Is there something peculiarly British about asking this issue? Or is this existential angst a global phenomenon? And second, what do you make of the prospects for authoritarian populism – that might not be the best term – in Great Britain? And do narratives of Britain's role in the world look likely to strengthen its appeal in the way that national narratives appear to strengthen Putin or Orban or Kaczynski?

CH: Interesting questions. Let's take them in turn. First, the French. I think this is exactly the right question – not least as it changes the context and the perspective a little – just enough to help us see what we might not otherwise see. Put bluntly, I feel that I understand Britain better for no longer living in Britain (the same was true when I lived in the US for a short time in the late 1990s) – one can see certain things more clearly for not being totally immersed within them. So what does that change of perspective offer here? Well, first, the French have perhaps never sought to project their power globally in the same way as the British – well, not since Napoleon at

least! And, as this perhaps already suggests, they had less global presence and less global pretension to lose! But the sense of a vacuum where once there was something else is certainly less pronounced (though I think it is still palpable and in that sense I think you are right to speak in terms of a global sense of existential angst). But what is made clear by thinking about this in comparative terms is that, whatever their problems, the French (in stark contrast to the British) have never really lacked a sense of what they stand for – and a confidence that they are right to project what they stand for internationally. Here, of course, the revolution – and the cathartic cleansing of the state that, in effect, it ushered in – is crucial. For the French revolution allows the modern French state to present itself as some kind of bastion of a progressive modernity – most notably in and through the sense that it stands for the public good – the *res publica*. As we know the notion of the republic (the collective or public good) can cover a multitude of sins, but it is also exactly what the contemporary question of global governance is all about ... and that gives the French an easier entry point in way – they have a facility when it comes to discourses of this kind that the British (with their historic preference for philanthropy and the private, rather than public, provision of public goods) have never really had.

And what about authoritarian populism? Again, the hunch here is right, I think. Sadly, the time of authoritarian populism seems to have come again – though a little like the relationship between Blairism and Thatcherism before it, today's authoritarian populism (particularly in its more subtle incarnations) is rather more *sotto voce* than in its earlier manifestation. To be fair, that is not true of the authoritarian populism of Trump or Putin or, indeed, Marine Le Pen; but it is true, I think (to date, at least) of Cameron and Osborne, of Boris Johnson and even per-

haps of Nigel Farage. Yet this comparative quietism does not make it any less invidious – not least because it makes it rather more difficult to see for what it really is. For, as the late great Stuart Hall taught us all those years ago, authoritarian populism is, in effect, the hegemonic correlate of inequality – they go together. When one abandons “one nation” politics and seeks, instead, to make a political virtue of pitting the “haves” (who will have more) against the “have nots” (who will have less) one needs a series of rhetorical strategies for demonising the various “losers” as “undeserving” and a political strategy for penalising their moral fecklessness and, indeed, their resistance. That is today's resurgent authoritarian populism in a nutshell. Sadly it is becoming more not less salient.

SW: Well, I don't think I have ever felt as much political danger – I would even say from the potential of fascism – in the midst of political failure of our institutions in Britain and Europe and everywhere else and in the face of so many pressing challenges to our economies, societies and the planet. I do retain some vestiges of dialectical hope in all this. Marx said something like “humans never set themselves questions that they cannot answer” – though even if we were to stop all carbon emissions tomorrow there is apparently still enough CO₂ in the atmosphere to slowly melt the icecaps. Things should still be fine: we have two thousand years to learn to breathe under water!

But let's move to a conclusion if we can about the sorts of forces and arguments that might be capable of dealing with some of these challenges and about the kind of role we could envisage for Britain in the world. We probably wouldn't want to start from here, but what's the best we can do given where we are. Corbynism? The Green Party? A progressive Scottish nationalism? The revival of a centre-left in the UK as a whole? In grassroots movements? In the re-establishment of the authority of scientific and pro-science elites, as Mill might have argued about the spirit of this age?

And what could Britain uniquely contribute internationally to making a better global order? I suppose there is considerable recent history of tolerance, including multiculturalism as contested as that of course is. We have just about got the rule of law and constitutionalism, including civilian control of the military. Our nations live together in one state and we even have civilised and democratic processes to adjudicate over separation. There are the vestiges of the ethical socialism you referred to earlier. We have a huge economy, military and great cultural reach. The world increasingly speaks our language – even in France these days. We are a democracy, if not a republic. Surely, a sensible and attractive and achievable role for Britain in the world can be made from these building blocks?

CH: Ah yes, dialectics! When it is really, really bad we can always put our faith in those – and, in a sense, we have to. But the argument, such as it is, always seems to me at least to be little more than the suggestion that it can't carry on getting worse forever. In a way, it's little more than an optimistic spin on pessimism. But based on our rather bleak conversation up until this point

(sorry!) it would appear to be all that we have. And in a sense, too, that is right and perhaps shouldn't surprise us. In fact, when I go looking for optimism the thought I run through my head is that Keynesianism was not born (and certainly not implemented) in the decade of the Great Depression itself; similarly, if we see neo-liberalism as the (eventual) product of the crisis of the 1970s, it was not until at least the mid 1980s when things were really discernibly and irreversibly neo-liberal. That suggests that we need to be just a little more patient – that history's wheel takes a little longer to turn and what leads it to turn is the capacity of political elites to test to destruction the paradigm that defines their worldview. Our pessimism, it strikes me, is a product of witnessing the testing to destruction of the neo-liberal paradigm. That, of course, is not a very edifying spectacle. But it does contain within it the seeds of a little optimism.

Of course, I may be wrong, and in a way (dare I say it) this may be too optimistic. Because what takes us ultimately from one paradigm to the next is not the degree of devastation wreaked by the disintegration of the old, but the presence of a credible new paradigm. And that's the really depressing part. Corbynism is no alternative paradigm; indeed, Corbynomics is practically non-existent. Indeed, that is what depresses me most about the British context at present – the seeming incapacity of any of the major political parties to contemplate an alternative to the Anglo-liberal growth model and the inexorable ratcheting up of inequality with which it continues to be associated. I do not think Corbyn will endure as Labour leader – and one of the reasons for that is that his seeming radicalism does not extend to economic policy. But if I am honest, I struggle to identify the carriers of a new economic paradigm in any British political party. In part, though, this is to look in the wrong direction.

For there is, in fact, a very strong argument for the suggestion that any such credible new economic paradigm needs to be projected not domestically but internationally and that the transition to post-neo-liberalism needs to be co-ordinated internationally and embedded institutionally at a global level. That makes a great deal of sense to me – but it hardly makes the task any easier; nor does it bring its realisation any closer.

SW: Thank you Colin. We are colleagues and friends and that certainly is no guarantee of even mild agreement. But here we are, agreeing largely about the problems and their causes, equally without a motor force in history that might help address them, and having a conversation to a magazine of the democratic left in Scotland where hope must surely still well up. So, let's engage in some self-criticism at the end. Fascism is possible, the ice caps will melt. But let's say we wanted to define a research project to test that we were wrong, that political forces are indeed emerging that could build an alliance for a Britain that would make Britain play a leading role in a progressive world. We have colleagues – and friends – who do indeed do such

research. What kind of project would it be? Perhaps on the internet? Perhaps on the sharing economy?

CH: Ah, that's easy. Though I suspect my answer might surprise you. I think we need to know far far more about how the young think about politics and how, above all, that sense of enthusiasm and excitement and optimism that they all seem to have when they are really young that our world can be made a better place is somehow squeezed out of them. I think what we would find

would be that they do indeed have this almost natural (and naturally progressive) sense of politics but that they start to lose it (particularly if they are educated in Britain) when they start to label it, and other things too, as "political". I think that is a tragedy. We need to encourage our youngsters to be creative optimists and to think collectively and responsibly of and about the futures they wish to forge – and we need to encourage them to think that this is politics and that politics is a good and a necessary thing, not something to be ashamed of and to wish for as little of as is humanly possible. That politics is

their capacity, in the end, to forge a world better than the one that we have forged for them – a world they can be proud of and that can be a better legacy for their children than the one we bequeath them.

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