

## Comment

# Europe's imperial ambitions led to Brexit

Dismissing older Leave voters as nostalgic for empire overlooks the role of EU integrationism

Nigel Biggar



Brexit is the fault of our romantic attachment to the British empire, says Vince Cable. Writing recently, the leader of the Liberal Democrats judged that the vote to leave the European Union was caused by the old "imposing a worldview coloured by nostalgia for an imperial past on a younger generation". Sir Vince, like many Remainers who subscribe to this view, is both wrong and right: wrong that imperial nostalgia swung the vote, but right that empire had something to do with it.

It's true that leading Brexiters envisioned a resumption of pre-EU trading relations with the English-speaking world. But the reasons that campaigners give are one thing, the reasons people have for supporting them quite another. There's no evidence that Leavers were moved by a desire to wind back the clock. There's plenty of evidence that they were mainly moved by contemporary worries about the scale of immigration and irritation at European judicial interference.

Empire did have something to do with it. But it wasn't the British version; rather, it was the one that European integrationists are intent on building. Let's be clear: there's nothing wrong with that as such. Empires are morally ambiguous, just

like nation states. The British empire presided over the annihilation of Tasmanian aboriginals in the early 19th century. However, it also suppressed the Atlantic and African slave trades for more than 100 years after 1807 and it was the only power in the field against European fascism from May 1940 to June 1941. And as we contemplate Israel-Palestine, along with the agony of Syria, a certain imperial nostalgia for the Pax Ottomanica is surely forgivable.

But is it really apt to stick the label "imperial" on the project of the EU? Yes, because it aspires to create a multinational state with sufficient centralised power to hold its own against other global giants such as the US and China. Also because, while it now helps to keep the peace, it was nevertheless born out of conquest: the very condition of its possibility was the military defeat of

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Germany by the Allies in 1945 and their imposition of regime change.

Moreover, if the dominant powers of the EU don't threaten violence against the weaker ones, they do coerce. During the recent financial crisis Germany, which calls the shots in Europe, forced Greece to adopt a policy of austerity. It also imposed a government of technocrats on Italy. It may have been bloodless and it might have been justified but it was force and it was resented as such. This brings us to the point where the

imperial nature of the EU bears upon the Brexit vote. One of the classic challenges facing any empire is how to strengthen central cohesion while accommodating the varying needs and customs of the periphery. In the decades around 1900 British imperialists such as Alfred Milner worried about how to maintain British power in the face of the rise of the US and Germany. In response they sought to forge the "white dominions" (Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand) into an imperial federation with an imperial parliament. But the centre could not hold: the dominions weren't willing to surrender their hard-won national autonomy and fall into a tighter imperial embrace.

A century later, European integrationists worry about Europe's declining global power. So they're in a hurry to forge the nation-states of the EU into a pan-European bloc. Hence the imprudence of launching the euro in advance of the political will to create the central institutions necessary for its proper functioning, and then expanding the eurozone to include national economies with shaky public finances. The predicted result has been a financial crisis and a deflationary remedy imposed by the northern centre on the southern periphery, which has served to stoke nationalist resentment.

Because it kept its own currency, the UK has been spared that irritation. But it has suffered others, including judicial overreach. According to Richard Ekins, head of Policy Exchange's Judicial Power Project, and the EU legal expert Gunnar Beck, the European Court of

Justice is not an impartial arbiter of European law but an instrument of the imperial goal of "ever-closer union". In the name of that purpose, it has overridden the wording of the legal text of international treaties: for example, in extending the right to benefits of EU migrant workers. Such presumptuousness undermines trust between the EU and its member states by removing confidence that the union will be bound by the stated terms of treaties. It also undermines domestic confidence in national government by exposing its impotence to uphold the democratic will expressed in parliamentary decisions.

For the British, the greatest irritation has been caused by the EU's "fourth freedom" of movement. More about promoting European citizenship than enabling the free market, this has increased UK immigration on an unprecedented scale since the late 1990s. A major effect has been to discourage British employers from training unskilled Britons by providing them with a ready pool of labour. In refusing to compromise and allow greater national control over immigration, the EU has withheld from the British government an important tool for reversing this trend and addressing the plight of its poorest citizens.

So, no, Sir Vince, Brexit wasn't caused by the delusion of older Britons' imperial nostalgia. It was caused by the impatience, highhandedness and inflexibility of European imperial ambition.

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## Aid saves lives and stops problems reaching our shores

Priti Patel

A young woman in northeast Nigeria was woken in her bed by the blast of two suicide bombers. Looking down at herself covered in blood she felt relief, thinking it was hers. Only then did she realise that one of her four children was lying dead beside her.

Her story was one among many of the victims of Boko Haram, the terrorist group that now calls itself Islamic State West Africa Province. Scores have been murdered and many survivors are left hungry, homeless and terribly injured. Babies' bodies are shutting down and mothers who have lost everything else are fighting to keep them alive. These horrors feel a world away from life in Britain. But we would be foolish to think they do not touch us.

The fact is, a country such as Nigeria matters to the UK. There is evidence to show that Nigerians make up the largest proportion of migrants making the Mediterranean

## Extremism fostered far away can end up on Britain's streets

crossings to Europe. More than 16,000 Nigerians have arrived in Italy via the central Mediterranean route so far this year. We know that Nigeria is the fourth largest source country of modern slavery to the UK and that 875,500 Nigerians are living in modern slavery worldwide, including in Britain. The terrorist attacks we have experienced recently in European cities are a reminder that extremism fostered far away can end up on our streets.

We cannot ignore the fact that what is happening abroad, whether that is conflict, humanitarian disasters or grinding poverty and lack of opportunity, has impacts that we feel here at home. Global challenges such as mass migration, trafficking and disease pay no attention to national borders.

When the UK takes a stand, as we did last week in Nigeria, by taking action to provide lifesaving support for 1.5 million people on the brink of famine, or by helping 100,000 boys and girls to stay in school and build a brighter future, or simply by giving a young man the basics that he needs and making him less vulnerable to radicalisation, taxpayers can know that their money is being spent not just on transforming the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable and impoverished people, but also on creating a safer life in the UK.

If we were to stand back from this fight, we would be both abandoning our moral responsibilities and allowing other countries' problems to come closer to our shores.

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## Matthew Syed Notebook

### Lessons in virtue from a caring centenarian

I chatted to Auntie Doreen over the weekend. She has not been feeling too well, but was on good form, talking about her long life, asking after mine, and, as always, urging me to go to church on Sunday. "You'll have a marvellous time," she said. "Church is the best part of the week."

Doreen is one of the last surviving siblings of my late grandfather, and a living embodiment of the duty and sacrifice of the war generation. She grew up in a two-bedroom flat with nine brothers and sisters in a small mining community in the Rhondda valley, and moved to London at 15. Since then, she has spent a lifetime raising a family and putting others first. She will be 101 next month.

"She had an incredible work ethic," Philip, her son, told me. "In her sixties, she taught a recovering alcoholic how to read and write. She cooked for homeless people and volunteered for social projects. In her

nineties, she was still working at the corner shop, stacking shelves. She loved getting out and talking to people. It is only recently that she started slowing down."

The greatness of Britain, for me, has never been about celebrities, plastic or otherwise. It is about people like Doreen. People known by nobody except those whose lives they touched. "I hope you can come to my birthday next month," she said. "I am hoping to beat this illness."

### Uniform approaches

At the other end of the age spectrum, Evie, my four-year-old daughter, has her first day at school today. There was a bit of a palaver over the weekend, figuring out how to sew name tags into her uniform, but by lunchtime yesterday, everything was set. "This is the beginning of an adventure," I said to her, bursting with pride, as she stood in her grey coat and hat. "You are going to learn so much at school." She looked at me, curious. "Is that how you learnt

to watch so much football, daddy?" she said.

### Structures of power

Driving past the Natural History Museum in London last Friday, I was struck, as so often, by the beauty of its façade. There are few more lovely buildings in the capital. But I wonder if at least a part of its external beauty is bound up in one's knowledge of the treasures contained within.

What I am getting at, here, is the symbiosis between the inner and the outer in architecture. The Palace of Westminster seems peerless in its gothic self-confidence, but is this perception also bound up in one's knowledge that it contains the UK's seat of power? St Paul's Cathedral is unparalleled in its domed majesty, but is one's sense of awe inextricably linked with the many historic events it has hosted?

The longer I live, the more I glimpse the truth that buildings are closer to living organisms than static

artefacts. Or, to put it another way, architecture cannot be understood solely in terms of geometry and form but must also be placed within the context of history and cultural milieu.

### Wayne's world

I am a great believer in the right to privacy, but I have to confess that I am not terribly sympathetic to the plight of Wayne Rooney. The former England football captain has talked openly about the strength of his marriage in lucrative autobiographies, and let the BBC cameras into his home to project an image as a good family man. His handlers are aware that strong family values can be a powerful commercial asset.

Last week, however, he was picked up by the police for allegedly drink-driving in circumstances that bring his personal life directly into the frame (he was driving the car of a woman he had met in a nightclub). When someone's public image, carefully cultivated to maximise earning potential, is contradicted by their own private actions, the press has a right to expose it. This is a hole that Rooney has dug for himself.

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