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How ‘progressive’ anti-imperialism threatens the United Kingdom

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Contents

Foreword	1
Executive summary	2
1.0 Introduction	4
2.0 Narratives of the British Empire and their political uses	6
3.0 Anti-imperialism and the case for Scottish separatism	11
4.0 How to stop Scottish separatists from breaking up the UK	13
5.0 Scottish separatism, ‘progressivism’, and intensifying geopolitical competition	16
6.0 Conclusion	18
6.1 Recommendations	19
About the authors	21
About the Council on Geostrategy	22
Notes	23



Foreword

The threat of Scottish independence has posed one of the central challenges to policymakers over the past decade, yet when tackling this challenge few have explored some of the underlying themes that form the basis of some of the key Scottish separatist arguments. Although in 2014, economic arguments won the day, in 2021 despite the fiscal case for Scottish independence being weaker than ever, support for separation has not subsided.

As such, pro-union parties need to explore the underlying themes of Scottish separatism and seek to understand why the nationalist message appeals so much to large numbers of Scottish voters, particularly among younger age groups, and from there begin crafting a convincing and positive story for the British union.

This paper, by Prof. Nigel Biggar and Prof. Doug Stokes, takes a lead in exploring these themes. It explores how dominant narratives surrounding the British Empire have been used to villainise the United Kingdom and present Scotland as a victim of English imperialism. In turn, separatists have embraced a ‘progressive’ narrative which often seeks to de-legitimise Western institutions while giving minimal regard to a world without them.

In concluding, the paper sets out a series of feasible policy recommendations that can foster an environment supportive of a unionist fightback.

I heartily recommend that anyone passionate about not only preserving, but strengthening, the British union read this paper and consider the messages within.

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Executive summary

1. A country's identity draws from its past. Foreign policy is profoundly shaped by national identity and culture.
2. Across British institutions, a highly contested 'decolonial' narrative forms the dominant worldview. The United Kingdom (UK) is portrayed as uniquely wicked, with penitence achieved through the deconstruction of its institutions.
3. These developments have centrifugal geopolitical implications. Internationally, highly illiberal authoritarian states such as Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) seek to propagate these narratives against the West.
4. Domestically, Scottish separatists have weaponised this discourse to acquire moral appeal and authority. Independence is portrayed as an act of national repentance and self-purification; rejoining the European Union (EU) will be a moment of liberal cosmopolitan rupture.
5. 'Culture wars' are more than arguing over statues and history. They have profound implications for social cohesion and in the context of shifts in the international distribution of power, national security.
6. Therefore, the Government needs to develop a more coherent plan to challenge the deconstructive worldview now hegemonic across British public institutions and its cultural effects on post-Brexit Britain and the future of the West.
7. To defend and promote the right to free speech in challenging the 'anti-imperialist' narrative, the Government should:
 - a. Continue the drive to democratise public institutions through increasing diversity of political viewpoints.



- b. Extend the promotion of freedom of speech beyond Higher Education providers and enshrine it within UK law for all British citizens, especially in relation to private expression.
- c. Amend the Equality Act, especially the Public Sector Equality Duty, so as to reduce the subjective element in the definition of harassment.

To defend and promote an attractive idea of the UK, its past and its 'global' future, to Scottish voters, the Government should:

- a. Resource entities within civil society to develop a sophisticated social media strategy that distils a positive story about Britain and its past into memes, tailors them to specific groups of voters, and then broadcasts them in both words and images.
- b. Provision an entity within civil society to conduct a review of the way in which the history of Britain is actually taught in Scottish school classrooms, with a view to maintain political neutrality, exposing any undue Scottish nationalist bias.
- c. Talk up in Scotland the UK's leading role in international aid and development.

1.0 Introduction

From the People's Republic of China's (PRC) growing global ambition, Russia's military revisionism or the continuing threat from radical Islamist insurgencies, the 'open international order' – in the words of the Integrated Review – is assailed on many external fronts.¹ Whilst these states and social forces are very different, underlying their sense of global purpose is a historical narrative that shares many common elements. These include a sense of loss as a result of the malign agency of the West, the need to overturn the Anglo-American-led order and a belief that in so doing, a return to greater status will follow. Within this anti-Western narrative, an historical discourse on the role of the British Empire assumes an emblematic place. For example, the depiction of China's loss of Hong Kong to the British as part of a long history of its 'humiliation and the people's sorrow', according to Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has been used to justify the PRC's present crackdown in the former British territory.²

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the United States (US), and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as threats to the United Kingdom (UK) from forces committed to Scottish independence, a discourse that thinks in terms of colonised non-Western victim versus colonial Western oppressor has gained cultural traction. By their very nature, historical narratives are often highly potent in shaping national self-understanding. They thus carry profound political significance.

This is because a state's foreign and domestic policy draws from a deeper cultural story inextricably linked to national identity: before we know what we want, we need to know who we are. These cultural stories both enable and constrain action as powerfully as (if not more than) military or financial capabilities. They describe our place in the world, help order internal social relationships, and give purpose and meaning to action. In short, a cultural story of who we are is a necessary

¹ 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 16/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3vX8RGY> (found: 07/06/2021).

² Neil Connor, 'China's Xi Jinping recalls national "humiliation" to Britain as he seeks to stir patriotism in Hong Kong', *Daily Telegraph*, 01/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/2T7oFb1> (found: 07/06/2021).



precondition for politics; the purposeful structuring of human agency to attain what we want.

In this Policy Paper, we ask, in an age where identity politics and so-called ‘culture wars’ rage, how do the dominant narratives about the British Empire – a political formation that dissolved before many Britons were born – help to frame a sense of identity in the UK and what are the positional and political effects of these narratives? Our contention is that across British cultural institutions, from the media, universities, and even boardrooms, a newly emergent form of quasi-religious deconstructive secular theology draws on a highly contestable anti-imperialist version of history. We unpack this narrative and relate it to how the ‘culture wars’ are playing out in British politics, particularly in the debate over Scottish independence. We then conclude with some policy recommendations.



2.0 Narratives of the British Empire and their political uses

The explosion of global tumult as a result of the shocking killing of George Floyd and the ascendancy of the Black Lives Matter movement has placed history back in the spotlight. However, the controversy over the British Empire is not a controversy about history at all. For most, it is about the politics of the present, not enlightening our understanding of the past.

An empire is a single state that contains a variety of peoples, one of which is dominant. As a form of political organisation, it has been around for millennia and has appeared on every continent. The Assyrians were building an empire in the Middle East over four thousand years ago. They were followed by the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. In the sixth century BCE, the Carthaginians established a series of colonies around the Mediterranean. Then came the Athenians, followed by the Romans, and after them the Byzantine rump. Empire first appeared in China in the third century BCE and, despite periodic collapses, still survives today. From the seventh century CE, Muslim Arabs invaded east as far as Afghanistan and west as far as central France. In the fifteenth century, empire proved very popular: the Ottomans were doing it in Asia Minor, the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent, the Incas in South America, and the Aztecs in Mesoamerica. Further north, a couple of centuries later, the Comanche extended their imperial sway over much of what is now Texas, while the Asante were expanding their control in West Africa. And in the 1820s King Shaka led the highly militarised Zulus in scattering other southern African peoples to several of the four winds, conducting at least one war of extermination.

Set in this global historical context, the emergence of European empires from the fifteenth century onwards is hardly remarkable, even if they reached a scale hitherto unimaginable to most of their predecessors. The Portuguese were first off the mark, followed by the Spanish, and then, in the sixteenth century, by the Dutch, the French, and the English. The Scots themselves attempted to join their ranks in the 1690s, and Russians did so in the 1700s.



However, what is remarkable is that the contemporary controversy about empire shows little interest in any of the non-European empires, past or present. European empires are its sole concern, and of these, above all others, the English – or, as it became after the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707, the British – one. The reason for this focus is that the real target of today’s anti-imperialists or anti-colonialists is the West or, more precisely, the Anglo-American liberal world order that has prevailed since 1945. This order is supposed to be responsible for the economic and political woes of what used to be called the ‘Developing World’ and now answers to the name ‘Global South’. Allegedly, it expresses the characteristic ‘white supremacism’ and ‘racism’ of the old European empires, displaying arrogant, ignorant disdain for non-Western cultures, thereby humiliating non-white peoples. And it presumes to impose alien values and to justify Western, and particularly UK and US, military interference.

The anti-imperialists are a disparate bunch. They include academic ‘post-colonialists’, whose Bible is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and who tend to inhabit university departments of literature more than they do history.³ For one eminent expression of their view, take Elleke Boehmer, Professor of World Literature in English at the University of Oxford, whose departmental web page presents her as ‘a founding figure in the field of colonial and postcolonial studies’:⁴

Is killing other people bad? Yes. Is rapacious invasion bad? Absolutely. And so it must follow that empires are bad, as they typically operate through killing and invasion. Across history, empires have involved the imposition of force by one power or people upon others. That imposition generally involves violence, including cultural and linguistic violence, such as the suppression and subsequent loss of native languages...[E]mpire requires exclusion to operate...spawning wars and genocides...[N]o empire sets out to bring law and order to other peoples in the first instance. That is not empire’s primary aim. The first motivating forces are profit and more profit.⁵

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴ ‘Professor Elleke Boehmer’, University of Oxford, No date, <https://bit.ly/3x2SmJi> (found: 07/06/2021).

⁵ Elleke Boehmer and Tom Holland, ‘Are empires always bad?’, *Prospect*, 12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3z7N7JZ> (found: 07/06/2021).



Stark perspectives such as this are historically inaccurate and politically dangerous. Whatever its intellectual merits, academic ‘post-colonialism’ is not just of academic importance. It is politically significant, too, insofar as its worldview is frequently absorbed by student citizens and often conditions them to repudiate, without proper consideration, the ethical foundations of the West.

Thus, academic post-colonialism is an ally – no doubt, inadvertent – of the CCP and Vladimir Putin’s regime in Russia, which are determined to expand their own (respectively) authoritarian power at the expense of the West. In effect, if not by intent, they are supported by the West’s own ‘progressive’ Left, whose British branch would have the UK withdraw from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), surrender its nuclear weapons, renounce its global military presence, and retire alongside ostensibly ‘neutral’ countries. Presumably, the ‘progressives’ assume that the warm glow of this post-modern moralism will suffice to pacify rapidly rising autocracies such as China, whose military spending grows larger year by year and is now only surpassed by the US.⁶ In embracing this glow, they overlook vulnerable front-line democracies such as Estonia and Taiwan, who cannot afford such luxury.

In order to undermine the supposedly oppressive international and national orders of the West, the anti-colonialists have to undermine faith in them. In his novel, *The Man without Qualities*, which lay unfinished at his death in 1942, Robert Musil mused on the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War:

However well founded an order may be, it always rests in part on a voluntary faith in it...; once this unaccountable and uninsurable faith is used up, the collapse soon follows; epochs and empires crumble no differently from business concerns when they lose their credit.⁷

One important way of corroding faith in the West is to delegitimise its record, a major part of which is the history of European empires, especially the British one. This is why the anti-colonialists have focused on slavery, presenting it as the West’s dirty secret, which

⁶ For defence spending data, see: ‘SIPRI Military Expenditure Database’, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fWQfkv> (found: 07/06/2021).

⁷ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, translated by Sophie Wilkins (London: Picador, 2017), p. 575.



epitomises its essential, oppressive, racist white supremacism. This, they claim, is who we really are; this is what we must repent of.

Politically, this makes good sense. If you want to make others obey your will, it is surely useful to subvert their self-confidence and weaponise guilt: one of the most powerful and disabling of human emotions. If Henry Kissinger is to be believed, ever since Sun Tzu's Art of War in the fifth century BCE, Chinese realpolitik has placed a premium on gaining psychological advantage.⁸ Certainly, illiberal states are looking to gain that now. In 2011 a British diplomat in China was told: 'What you have to remember is that you come from a weak and declining nation'.⁹ And when, in July 2020, Britain criticised the Chinese regime for running roughshod over the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, in which the PRC had agreed to respect Hong Kong's relative autonomy and liberal rights until 2047, Beijing's ambassador was quick to dismiss the criticism as colonial interference.¹⁰ Similarly, when the hard Left wants to undercut Britain's role as a major supporter of the post-1945 liberal international order, or when Scottish separatists want to construct their alienation from the UK, it is politically useful to recount the history of the British Empire as a litany of ugly racial prejudice, rapacious economic exploitation, and violent atrocity.¹¹

The whole truth about the British Empire is morally complicated and ambiguous. Even the history of British involvement in slavery had a virtuous ending, albeit one that the anti-colonialists are determined we should overlook. After the best part of two hundred years of transporting slaves to the West Indies and the American colonies, the British abolished both the trade and the institution of slavery within the empire in the early 1800s. They then spent a century-and-a-half exercising their imperial power in deploying the Royal Navy to stop

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 22 ff.

⁹ Gideon Rachman, *Easternisation: War and peace in the Asian century* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), p. 61.

¹⁰ 'The UK side knows well that Hong Kong is no longer under its imperial rule, and that Hong Kong has returned to China...However, the UK Government keeps making irresponsible remarks on Hong Kong affairs...These...constitute gross interference in China's internal affairs.' See: 'China ambassador to the UK: "Hong Kong is no longer under colonial rule"', *Sky News*, 06/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/34UytYE> (found: 07/06/2021).

¹¹ See, for example, George Monbiot's (a journalist and commentator) five-minute online caricature of 'Western civilisation'. George Monbiot, 'The true legacy of Christopher Columbus: "Western Civilisation"', *Double Down News*, 08/10/2018, <https://bit.ly/34XYLJq> (found: 07/06/2021).



slave-ships crossing the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and suppressing the Arab slave trade across Africa.¹²

Meanwhile, in contemporary public debate, the Ottoman Empire, which was historically hegemonic in large parts of the Middle East and whose colonisation of large swathes of Europe was instrumental in the development of not only the black slave trade but also the white slave trade of the Barbary states, is strikingly absent.¹³ What this indicates is that those who seek to weaponise guilt, based on a politically partisan reading of history, are in danger of reproducing a simplistic story of Western villains and non-western heroes that once again places Europe at centre stage. Ironically, this form of Eurocentrism threatens to erase non-western colonial projects, cultures and civilisations from history, rather than seeing them as purposeful agents in their own right, who are intimately bound up with world history and the constitution of the modern world.¹⁴

Moreover, there is a more historically accurate, fairer, more positive story to be told about the British Empire than the anti-imperialists want us to hear. And the importance of that story is not just past but present, not just historical but political. What is at stake is not merely the pedantic truth about yesterday, but the self-perception and self-confidence of the British today and how they conduct themselves in the world tomorrow. What is also at stake is the very integrity of the UK, as debates over Scottish independence show.

¹² See: Nigel Biggar, 'Britain, Slavery, and Anti-Slavery', *Briefings for Britain*, 26/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3cobvx9> (found: 07/06/2021).

¹³ The French historian of slavery, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, has estimated that the Islamic enslavement of whites far surpassed the transatlantic trade in black slaves. See: Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les traites négrières* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

¹⁴ Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).



3.0 Anti-imperialism and the case for Scottish separatism

The anti-imperialist narrative poses a threat to the very union of the UK. Many Scottish nationalists equate Britain with empire, and empire with evil, seeing Scotland's possible independence as part of the progressive arc of history. Alex Salmond's new party, Alba, captured the sentiment well when in its first historically-focused video it talked about breaking the 'spine of English superiority' and a victory for Scottish independence as a victory for 'people power'.¹⁵

From this perspective, the secession of Scotland from the Anglo-Scottish Union and the consequent break-up of the UK would be an act of national repentance from an oppressive imperial past. Full salvation would then be achieved through reabsorption into the European Union (EU) where Scotland's new-found independence could then be subsumed within the EU's political superstructure. Again, this discourse paints the UK as tainted, whilst the EU is seen embodying liberalism, pacifism and solidarity. A vote for Scottish independence is a 'right has never been more important given the threat Brexit poses to the internationalist, welcoming European ethos held by so many people in Scotland' argued Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party. With the 'founding values of the EU – human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' Scotland's values too.¹⁶ What is it that drives separatists' faith in such belief? The answer, in large part, is the denigration of Britain as 'in thrall to imperialist myths and dreams'.¹⁷

Although both an independent Scotland and a rump-UK would survive the break-up of the Anglo-Scottish Union, the UK would be significantly weakened, and along with it, the West. First, it would make the security of the UK much more complicated to achieve: an independent Scotland could be ruled by a government that did not share London's views of defence and foreign policy; the Royal Navy's access

¹⁵ 'The Bruce backs the ALBA Party to "Unite the Clans"', ALBA, 21/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/2S6ptx1> (found: 07/06/2021).

¹⁶ Nicola Sturgeon, 'Independence is Scotland's only route to rejoining EU', *The Irish Times*, 02/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/3fUZlOE> (found: 07/06/2021).

¹⁷ John Lloyd, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgotten: The Great Mistake of Scottish Independence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 52.



to the North Atlantic would be hindered; and the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent, currently based in Faslane, would be in doubt. Second, negotiations over the terms of independence could easily drag on for many years, creating a major distraction for the Government in London. Third, since it is a practical certainty that the Scottish separatists would not get all they want out of the negotiations, and that London and more broadly the English would be blamed, there is a high risk that resentment between the English and the Scots would rise to levels not seen since the eighteenth century. As a consequence, Britain's 'soft power' reputation as a haven of political stability and civility would be dealt a major blow, a propaganda coup would be handed Moscow and Beijing, and calls for the UK to cede its position as one of the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council would only grow stronger. Scottish independence would seriously damage the hard and soft power of the UK, and with it the defence of the West, just when Western solidarity is needed to counter the Russian kleptocracy's subversion and the CCP's bullying.



4.0 How to stop Scottish separatists from breaking up the UK

There are strong reasons to oppose Scottish independence for those who hold national stability and a cohesive political structure dear. But how? In the 2014 referendum, the case for the British Union was made almost entirely in the unromantic terms of pounds and pence. It worked then, but it probably would fail now. With the collapse in the price of oil and the real possibility of a hard border between Scotland and England, the economic case for independence is even weaker than it was six years ago. Yet that has not stopped separatism's allure.

The reason for this lies in separatist nationalism's nature as a secular religion, infusing quotidian lives with transcendent meaning, justifying the sacrifice of money and even life itself in the grand cause of the nation's spiritual redemption. In Ireland during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Irish separatism was often about the young revolting against their parents' collusion with decadent, materialist, militarist British civilisation, while spellbound by a vision of Gaelic national purity. Against such heady idealism, sober appeals to gradual, substantive reforms could not compete. In 1914, John Redmond, the moderate constitutional nationalist, had urged the Irish to put historic grievances behind them and focus instead on the concrete political achievements of recent years:

Do let us be a sensible and truthful people. Do let us remember that we today of our generation are a free people. We have emancipated the farmer; we have housed the agricultural labourer; we have won religious liberty;...and finally we have won an Irish parliament and an executive responsible to it.¹⁸

But to no avail. Crystallised and galvanised by the happenstances of the Easter Rising of 1916 and the draconian British reaction, revolutionary zeal left sense and truth trailing in its wake. The result was often disillusion. In 1956, one leading nationalist lamented that 'the phoenix

¹⁸ Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 2.

of our youth has fluttered to earth such a miserable old hen I have no heart for it.’¹⁹

So, how is the UK to be saved from disintegration and the Scots from bitter disillusion? Arguments that independence would be a major act of economic self-harm, or that Sturgeon’s Covid-19 performance has really not been much better than Boris Johnson’s, will probably move older, soberer floating voters. But for younger, idealistic Scots it is necessary to recover and develop a morally attractive story about the UK with which they would want to identify. The nationalist stereotype of post-Brexit, Tory Britain as worn-out, xenophobic, and devoted to impoverishing the poor needs to be confounded.

The good news is that recent announcements suggest that the Government understands this. Its ambitious Green agenda should attract the idealism of the young. The substantial £16.5 billion increase in defence spending, in conjunction with the Integrated Review, displays a ‘Global Britain’ serious about remaining an important pillar of the open international order in a time of geopolitical tension. And plans to ‘level up’ the working-class areas, particularly in northern England, evidence a commitment to social justice, addressing regional inequality and promoting a genuinely national community.

Just as importantly, the predictions of dire pain to the UK economy from Brexit have largely been illusory. As the International Monetary Fund concluded in March 2021, Brexit will have no macroeconomic effect on the British economy in the ten years after the referendum,²⁰ with UK prosperity linked to government policy rather than Brexit itself. In a note to clients, Goldman Sachs argued that it now expects British gross domestic product (GDP) to grow by a ‘striking’ 7.8% in 2021 – above their expectations for the US.²¹

So, there is a good story about Britain to tell. But more is needed to woo idealistic young Scots most mistrustful of the UK away from their revolutionary dreams of independence. We also need a sophisticated social media strategy that distils the story into accessible and entertaining social media content such as short videos and memes, tailors them to specific groups of voters, and then broadcasts them.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 322.

²⁰ Wolfgang Münchau, ‘The Brexit bounce is underway’, *The Spectator*, 21/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/350sVM9> (found: 07/06/2021).

²¹ ‘UK economy set to grow faster than the US this year – Goldman’, *Reuters*, 26/04/2021, <https://reut.rs/3z8wptR> (found: 07/06/2021).



In short, if the disintegration of the UK is to be prevented, faith in Britain needs to be revived. We need to remember what the UK is good for and that whereas German taxpayers are adamantly opposed to fiscal transfers to the Greeks, Londoners hardly bat an eyelid at the redistribution of ‘their’ taxes to Scotland. Latest figures show that each person in England on average benefitted from public spending worth £91 more than the taxes they paid: in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the figures were £2,543, £4,412 and £5,118, respectively. And whilst Scotland’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and tax revenues are similar to England’s, it also spends over £1,700 more per person on public services.²²

That is because the UK has achieved a level of multinational trust and solidarity of which the EU can still only dream. Moreover, if Britain no longer rules the waves alone, it can still help to secure them. Its GDP is four times what it was in 1945.²³ It is still the world’s fifth-largest economy.²⁴ It is one of only three serious democratic military powers, and it remains one of the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. In short, just because the UK is no longer ‘Number One’ does not mean that it is nothing. Britain has power and it should use it to best effect, punching above its weight at every opportunity.

The siren call of Scottish independence needs to be vigorously resisted. As John Lloyd puts it, ‘Scotland, in the twenty-first century, is both as free and secure a nation as the world of the early twenty-first century allows.’ He goes on: ‘It would be worse than a mistake, a crime, to hazard that for an independence which can bring nothing better’.²⁵ And the crime would not just be against the Scots and the other peoples of the UK. It would be a crime against the free and open nations and all that they stand for.

²² Gemma Tetlow and Aron Cheung, ‘The fiscal position of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’, Institute for Government, 28/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/3w4mx2I> (found: 07/06/2021).

²³ ‘Gross Domestic Product: chained volume measures: Seasonally adjusted £m’, Office for National Statistics, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fTpBJc> (found: 07/06/2021).

²⁴ ‘GDP, Current Prices’, International Monetary Fund, 2021, <https://bit.ly/34URoCQ> (found: 07/06/2021).

²⁵ John Lloyd, *Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgotten: The Great Mistake of Scottish Independence* (London: Polity, 2020), pp. 197–198.

5.0 Scottish separatism, ‘progressivism’, and intensifying geopolitical competition

As argued above, Scottish separatists and the ‘progressive’ left feed off a common anti-Western ‘Grand Narrative’, which is predicated on the elision of the alleged malignancy of yesterday’s British Empire with today’s supposed English chauvinism. The self-claimed ‘progressive’ nature of those calling up this narrative – whether to advance the cause of racial justice or righting historical wrongs in the name of instantiating a more equal and fairer world order – is at odds with recent geopolitical developments. Although it is Western-created, the international order, knitted together by a range of global institutions, has provided the context for worldwide economic development and the stunning rise of a new global middle class, mainly located in the developing world, not least in East Asia.²⁶

Indeed, in many ways, these shifts in economic power help explain the rise of the West’s ‘culture wars’. Globalisation is a buzzword that masks what was a deep structural change of the Anglophone political economies, whereby the balance of power between workers and capital shifted radically in the latter’s favour. The ‘offshoring’ of manufacturing by major multinational corporations saw the rapid decline of industrial jobs in the West and traditional communities built up around these industries. Accompanying this decline in manufacturing was the rise of new professional-managerial classes, where politics became insulated from popular pressures and instead became shifts between technocratic elites.

The ‘old’ left transformed from a politics of redistribution rooted in a materialist analysis of political economy to a new moralistic coalition with emphasis placed on identity and a politics of grievance to help corral new electoral coalitions in the context of deindustrialisation. On the right, a similar tension has grown between neoliberal free-marketeters happy to allow the market to rein in a process of ‘creative destruction’ versus more traditional conservatives whose more rooted communitarian values are based around patriotism and the primacy of the nation.

²⁶ Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).



These changes in the macro-economy and shifts in the international distribution of economic power are throwing up odd political alliances in British politics that cross-cut traditional party lines. Broadly speaking, a bifurcation of values predicated around borders versus borderlessness, or what David Goodhart, Head of the Demography, Immigration, and Integration Unit at Policy Exchange, has called the ‘somewheres’ and the ‘anywheres’, is now developing.²⁷ The ‘anywheres’ champion a deconstructive ‘progressivism’, which seeks to debilitate any notion of boundedness in favour of high-status ideas around openness, inclusion and diversity. In reality, these alleged progressive ideas act to reinscribe moral authority into elite cultural and political institutions by their assumption of the responsibility for minority upliftment and technocratic problem-solving, while abandoning responsibility for the ‘somewheres’, who are portrayed as backward, reactionary and beyond the pale.

The institutional apogee of this was of course the EU, which was why the struggle over Brexit was less a rational cost-versus-benefit analysis, and more akin to a theological battle. This faith in a flat borderless world always rested on a highly contingent post-1945 settlement that has been the anomaly and not the norm in human history. Moreover, this settlement has been sustained by US and UK security guarantees in NATO and the temporary resolution of Germany’s natural continental hegemony through the constitutionalisation of its power within a pan-European superstructure.

Through this lens, the impulse of Brexit can be interpreted as a return to the nation-state in an increasingly post-liberal world order where geopolitics and great power competition are making a rapid comeback. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the global economy may revert to a bipolar world that, from a trade perspective, will appear something like the Cold War stand-off between the Soviet Union’s Council for Mutual Economic Assistance trading bloc and the US-led Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) trading area, with developing countries siding with one or the other as they see fit.

²⁷ David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017).



6.0 Conclusion

What would this new world mean for the UK? If the world divides into competing regional trading blocs – arguably the more likely outcome – Britain would doubtless join the US bloc for economic and national security reasons. So too would the EU, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Life would not be comfortable. Competition for secure sources of supplies would be fierce. The situation within the US trading bloc might resemble the nineteenth-century world where states competed through formal and informal colonisation or through their ‘national champion’ companies for access to supplies. Except, in the twenty-first century, competition would be through overseas direct investment rather than formal colonisation. In a post-pandemic world, with likely deep fissures within the liberal economic order, the ‘national interest’ would be policymakers’ guiding light, rather than the moral compass. It is also worth noting that given the PRC’s much greater financial heft relative to the Soviet Union, the room for manoeuvre of politically equal but security subordinate states within this new bloc would be much greater, allowing more forceful assertion of interests, but quite possibly the weakening of group cohesion.

As such, if we accept that one of the prerequisites for the rise of these anti-Western states and movements is a degree of confidence and civilisational purpose, or what we might call a ‘telos’, what does the West now offer to counter these highly illiberal, often authoritarian and in some cases actively genocidal states and social forces? What is the social glue that holds free and open countries together with a common purpose to defend their shared institutional order, upon which their rights and freedoms – all highly fragile and historically contingent – now rest?

Surely the desire among so-called progressives to undermine the West’s dominance, to reduce its power, to deconstruct its narratives, to challenge its philosophy and overthrow its institutional order, is an impulse that, ironically, was underpinned by a more confident and assured Western hegemony? The West’s long post-1945 boom, which helped fund the welfare state and universities throughout Western Europe, provided the post-1968 generation of left-wing intellectuals – the ideological architects of today’s social justice movements – with a



false sense of security. They could call for revolution in the expectation that, if their dreams of social upheaval ever materialised, the West could then become a benign force of global change.

However, in the present context of rising illiberal ‘civilisational-states’ and the weakening US and UK – in large part because of the raging culture wars – anti-Western Westerners risk sawing off the very branch on which they so comfortably sit. Our question is this: as power shifts away from the West, which is one of the most progressive civilisational constructs in human history – Where else would sexual or ethnic minorities prefer to be? – what will come to replace it? The anti-Western anti-imperialists should be careful what they wish for.

6.1 Recommendations

To defend and promote the right to free speech in challenging the ‘anti-imperialist’ narrative, the Government ought to:

1. Continue the drive to democratise public institutions through increasing diversity of political viewpoints – as announced by Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – and incorporating a range of lived experiences beyond Central London and other metropolitan areas. The issues thrown up by Brexit have really brought to light how a range of elite cultural institutions, charities, universities – even government departments – have become largely homogenous in their worldview.
2. Extend the promotion of freedom of speech beyond Higher Education providers and enshrine it within UK law for all British citizens, especially in relation to private expression.
3. Amend the Equality Act, especially the Public Sector Equality Duty, so as to reduce the subjective element in the definition of harassment. As it now stands, the ‘eye of the beholder’ definition has had a chilling effect on intellectual life, and reverses the cornerstone of British law: ‘the presumption of innocence’. Moreover, equality, diversity and inclusion bureaucracies, backed



by technocratic elites, are assuming ever greater unelected power across universities, institutions, charities and even corporations.

To defend and promote an attractive idea of Britain, its past and its 'global' future, to Scottish voters, the British Government should:

1. Resource entities within civil society to develop a sophisticated social media strategy that distils a positive story about Britain and its past into memes, tailors them to specific groups of voters, and then broadcasts them in both words and images.
2. Provision an entity within civil society to conduct a review of the way in which the history of Britain is actually taught in Scottish school classrooms, with a view to maintain political neutrality, exposing any undue Scottish nationalist bias.
3. Talk up in Scotland the UK's leading role in international aid and development, how this is a continuation of initiatives undertaken within the late British Empire, and how bodies such as the UK's CDC Group and Department for International Development (now a component of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) stem directly from colonial-era institutions. 'CDC' once stood for 'Commonwealth/Colonial Development Corporation'.



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The Council on Geostrategy is an independent non-profit organisation situated in the heart of Westminster. We focus on an international environment increasingly defined by geopolitical competition and the environmental crisis.

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