



Singapore-on-Thames: The Anglosphere and the Brexit Imaginary

A lecture by Dr Ben Wellings
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Dr. Ben Wellings began his lecture by noting that contrary to the popular notion that Brexit was a popular revolt by those left behind from globalization, Brexit was an elite-led contingent project built on the idea of the Anglosphere, combined with popular grievances. Hence, he would like to delve into this idea of what is the Anglosphere that has been forced up the political agenda leading up to Brexit and where it cropped up in the 2016 referendum.

Dr. Wellings noted that there is a racialized dimension to the common narrative that the white working class who felt left behind by globalization was responsible for Brexit. Globalization and Britain in the EU was seen to be benefitting the professional classes who particularly valued high mobility around Europe and the world. Hence, what we got was a great reaction to this and it came out in the 2016 referendum. It was also alleged that the working class was turning towards the Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP). However, Dr Wellings pointed out that in the 2015 general elections in UK, 4 million people voted for UKIP whereas 17 million voted for UK to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum. This huge discrepancy in numbers shows that support for UKIP was not what resulted in Brexit.

Dr. Wellings highlighted that Brexit should instead be seen as a polite middle class revolt done in conjunction with an elite project. Someone had to articulate the idea to

leave but in doing so, anti-EU factions throughout the 1990-2000s had to consider alternative trade possibilities outside of the EU for UK to be economically viable. The outcome of Brexit was frequently misplaced on the working class in the north of England but by factoring in the differential turnout and the size of the denominator population, most people who voted to leave (much higher in absolute number) lived in the more middle class south of England (Hennig and Dorling, 2016).

An exit poll conducted after the referendum by Lord Ashcroft of those who voted to leave, 49% said they voted to leave because of sovereignty, 33% for controlling migration, 13% voted because they think if UK remained in the EU, they have no say over its expansion and only 6% voted said Britain would be better off outside the EU. Why were the numbers so small for the last option? Dr. Wellings pointed to the elite project, where the Anglosphere comes into play.

The Anglosphere is an idea that suggests the English speaking people of the world are united and have similar qualities such as the ability for self government and a love for liberty. Moreover, these ideas are highly bound up with nostalgia of the past. The Anglosphere encapsulates 5 core nations (UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) which were all formerly part of the British Empire.

This idea had been knocking around in think tanks, papers, and magazines but was first used in a formal sense in 2015 by UKIP in its party manifesto, which suggested that Europe was limiting for Britain's ambitions. Dr. Wellings said it is an ephemeral ideology which has some malleability; more countries could be added according to the arguments being made. The manifesto also named India and the Caribbean as part of the constellation with the Anglosphere. Although there is some overlap, the Anglosphere is not the Commonwealth. However, British policy makers now also see the Commonwealth as a viable alternative to the EU more than it was in 1973 when Britain joined the EU. One reason is that Commonwealth contains a rising India which is a great prize for free trade.

Singapore also featured in the Brexit campaign in the form of a goal that served to provide an existing reality of what Britain could be outside of Europe. The elite Brexiteers pointed to Singapore as an example of an outward looking nation with a large financial sector, a deregulated haven that Britain could aspire to be; hence the name for London as "Singapore-on-Thames". Dr. Wellings pointed out that in the early debates on Brexit, the Leave campaign held onto the idea that the Britain as part of Europe was not globally engaged; this idea, although not true, was not countered by Remainers. In fact, Singapore has high levels of migration which is contrary to popular discourse in Brexit of curbing migration. What the elite wanted was a refashioning of the British model of capitalism and reworking Britain's relations with the world.

The leaders of New Zealand, USA, and Canada at the time were not advocates of Brexit and spoke in favor of UK remaining in the EU. However, this only led Brexiteers to reject the establishment and do something different. Moreover, when David Cameron asked Angela Merkel to reduce migration into the EU and UK and was rejected, Brexiteers characterised his attempts as proof of the need for the UK to take back control. They also had the wrong idea of the immigration system in Australia, mixing it up with the asylum system, which Nigel Farage referred to as “Australian-style points-based immigration-system”.

The EU and Canada has signed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade agreement and this was seen as a model for Britain after EU, though with modulations. Hence, the new model has been called the Canada+ agreement. This suggests some bilateral relationship with the bloc when Britain is out of the EU. There are contentions as to what being out means—whether it means being completely out of the single market or being part of the single market but with no say over the EU like Norway. The WTO is seen as the platform to mediate a trade agreement based on the Canada model. Another important factor is a free trade agreement with America, which is seen as the “holy grail” by Leavers. However, this has become problematic with the election of Trump who is seen as protectionist and anti-free trade. Trump’s protectionism threatens transatlantic ties in a time when Britain is working hard to replace the equivalent of 27 free trade agreements, which is the result of leaving the EU.

Dr. Wellings also highlighted the Bruges Speech made by Margaret Thatcher in 1988. It was remembered as a Eurosceptic manifesto—a key moment where Margaret Thatcher broke with European consensus and spelled out a different vision for integration that became the basis for Brexiteers calling for UK to leave the EU. It also established the Anglosphere as a serious topic in the political right wing. Dr. Wellings argued that Bruges Speech is actually a pro-European document although it is anti-federalist. In his view, it sketched a different sense of Britain's relation with Europe which cropped up in the referendum. The narrative showed that the Britain used to be great but was diminished by European integration. It harkens back to the war where Britain and allies stopped Hitler regime and saved democracy on the continent. Against this post-war peace, the EU became an institutional symbol of Britain's diminishment and the idea was that outside of EU, global Britain can be great again.

Of the three pillars of Anglosphere that hold up the argument for Brexit, the first is representative democracy. Brexiteers declaimed EU democracy which is often questioned for its low voter turnout and seen to be different from the popular tenets of British democratic self-government. The second pillar is the memory of the first and second world wars. The latter in particular has come to signify Franco-German reconciliation and hence, not a part of British history. For the UK, Europe is more about trade than peace. Hence, it was also a diminished self-confidence about national

identity that propelled arguments for Brexit. The third pillar is the memory of empire of free trade associated with Britain's past. The logic used by Brexiteers is that Britain's greatness in history as an imperial empire means it should be able to do free trade deals outside of the EU and not be threatened by this prospect.

Brexit has had some impact on the unity of the UK, particularly for Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scotland had once voted to remain as part of the UK in order to stay in the EU; however, with Brexit, the situation has changed for them. The Irish border was also the one of the last sticking point in Brexit negotiations because a hard border between Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would alienate the Catholic community in Northern Ireland but a border between Northern Ireland and the UK impinges on the sovereignty of the UK. There is a lot of rhetoric about keeping the UK together under the banner of being "British". Dr. Wellings said it is important to note that those who self-identify as British are not opposed to staying in the EU whereas those who self-identify as English are the ones who want to leave. Hence, Brexit is putting a lot of strain on internal cohesion of the United Kingdom.

Brexit is a significant loss for the EU as well; UK after all is 5th largest economy in the world and has 17% of EU's population as well as being a major security player in the EU. While this could affect the major institutions in the EU, the overall conclusion is that France and Germany are the main beneficiaries of Brexit. Since Italy has been going in a Eurosceptic direction, it's unlikely to play a bigger part in the EU. It is said that EU disintegration will not be caused by Brexit, migration, or eurozone crisis but by Germany not taking up its leadership role as it did in the past. Since Angela Merkel has stepped down from her party, there is a successor to Germany's leadership in the EU: Emmanuel Macron. Together with Merkel, they have reasserted the narrative that European prosperity is about cooperation and peace in the form of Franco-German bilateral relations. The political dilemma Macron faces is: should the EU reinforce this kind of rhetoric around globalization, which has sparked a populist backlash around the world?

In conclusion Dr Wellings said that even those who espoused the term "Anglosphere" on the political right described it initially as political-science fiction. However, Brexit has helped manifest this idea of an Anglosphere. Although the rise of China and Japan has dissipated it on the global stage, there is positive reinforcement from Australia and New Zealand, who want free trade with Britain. Dr Wellings made the final observation that the result of the referendum showed that Brexiteers had a narrative that roused the people to action while the other side, the Remainers, did not have a compelling counter-narrative. Hence, he believed that the Anglosphere went a long way in providing the alternative for the EU and made Brexit possible.