

The Anglosphere: Past, present and future

Andrew Mycock and Ben Wellings discuss the renewed aspirations for greater collaboration among the ‘English-speaking peoples’, and the likelihood of their success



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Since the late 1990s, a small but influential group of Eurosceptic politicians and public commentators from across the English-speaking world have argued that the Anglosphere, incorporating the ‘core states’ of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, could provide an alternative form of international orientation if the United Kingdom were to leave the European Union.

Brexit has thrust this idea into the centre of British politics. It is currently helping to shape the UK’s relationship with the EU and the rest of the world. For its supporters, the Anglosphere encompasses an extensive, but ill-defined, Anglophonic community bonded by a shared language and associated forms of literature, culture, sport, media and familial ties, as well as the mutual commemoration of past and present military conflicts, and ascription to a ‘civilisational’ heritage founded on the values, beliefs and practices of free-market economics and liberal democracy. In short, the Anglosphere appears to be a better ‘fit’ for

English-speaking countries when compared to regional forms of integration, not least in Britain’s case, the European Union.



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Past

Although the term ‘Anglosphere’ is a recent addition to the vocabulary of British foreign relations, interest in Anglosphere transnationalism is not new. According to Srdjan Vucetic, the word itself was first recorded in 1995.¹ The origins of the Anglosphere are located in the late 19th century when imperial federation was proposed as a response to the growing political instability within the British Empire and growing competition from external rivals, including the United States. In a brief period from the early 1880s until the First World War, advocates argued for the establishment of a transnational union of the ‘Mother Country’ and its settler Dominions peopled by those of common British ‘stock’.

The proposition of a ‘Greater Britain’ was critically undermined however by the reluctance of many within the British imperial metropole to cede significant powers to the settler colonies or relinquish colonial possessions. Ambiguities persisted amongst its proponents as to the membership of an imperial federation beyond Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Some sought some to include Fiji, the West Indies, and even India and the United States within this new organisation of ‘English-speaking’ peoples. Support for imperial federation receded after the First World War, which encouraged the intensification of autonomous Dominion nationalisms and initiated the slow disintegration of the British Empire. The Second World War accelerated this change. The ‘New Commonwealth’ governments that emerged during the post-Second World War period

1. Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

of decolonisation rejected the racialised parameters of 'Greater Britain'. Finally, the UK's accession to the European Communities appeared to signal the end of the British Empire as an important component of the international order.

Yet the concept of the 'English-speaking peoples' was not universally rejected as a meaningful geopolitical and transnational community, either in the UK or across the Anglophone world. The Anglosphere was advanced as an idea by an influential international alliance of predominantly conservative politicians, commentators and public intellectuals who shared an insurgent ideological and geopolitical agenda that informed ambitions for an alternative world order. The most prominent of these advocates has been American businessman James C. Bennett, who argues that shared history, culture, and language means the Anglosphere is uniquely placed to exploit the technological, social and economic opportunities of the 21st century.² Anglo-American historian Robert Conquest suggested that a future Anglosphere union should be 'weaker than a federation, but stronger than an alliance'.³

Present

The emergence of a right-wing Euroscepticism in the UK from the early 1990s encouraged and required a renaissance of Anglospherism as an alternative to membership of the European Union. Political attention intensified when the Conservatives came to power as part of a coalition government in 2010. Leading figures, notably Foreign Secretary William Hague and London Mayor Boris Johnson, sought to exemplify the potential of the Anglosphere as a counterweight to Europe by seeking to intensify links with conservative-led governments amongst Britain's 'traditional allies' in Australia, Canada and New Zealand to complement and enhance the UK's relations with the EU and its other member-states.

Pushing this foreign policy realignment was the domestic electoral success of the UK Independence Party from 2009. Euro-rejectionists like UKIP leader Nigel Farage went further, invoking the economic potential of the Anglosphere as an alternative to the membership of the EU. During the Brexit referendum, senior Conservatives who were aligned with the 'Leave' campaign – notably Michael Gove, Daniel Hannan and David Davis – also made explicit reference to the potential of the Anglosphere. Thus the Anglosphere provided a point of commonality amongst those campaigning for Brexit.

The political appeal of the Anglosphere to British Brexiters is both ideological and geopolitical. Proponents

argue that the Anglosphere will afford opportunities to reject European social democratic values and norms – large welfare states, strong trade unions and high taxation – in favour of shared ascription to the tenets of neoliberalism or 'Anglobalisation', and the shared values of liberal interventionism. Geopolitically, the Anglosphere's supporters seek to re-establish and re-intensify Britain's economic and political links with former colonies, Dominions and other non-European states.

Such aspirations rest on long-standing co-operation during the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the core elements of Anglosphere is the 'Five Eyes' intelligence-sharing network, a multilateral treaty for joint SIGINT co-operation signed in 1947 which binds the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Such military links are supplemented by at least 23 formal policy links between these five states and an unknown number of informal networks that exist between political parties, think-tanks and other vested interests within the core Anglosphere.⁴

The result of the EU referendum has seen 'Anglospherism' shift from aspirational advocacy on the fringes of the right to the centre of British politics, as the UK government has sought to re-imagine existing diplomatic, trade and security relationships. In her Lancaster House address in January 2017, Theresa May argued that a 'profoundly internationalist' post-EU 'Global Britain'



In her Lancaster House speech on 17 January 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May set out her vision for 'a truly Global Britain'. PHOTO: AFP.

2. James C. Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-Speaking Nations Will Lead the Way in the Twenty-First Century* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2004).

3. Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

4. Tim Legrand, 'Elite, exclusive and elusive: transgovernmental policy networks and iterative policy transfer in the Anglosphere', *Policy Studies*, 37:5 (2016).

should draw on its distinctive national history and culture to 'build relationships with old friends and new allies alike'. Her desire to reaffirm and strengthen ties with such 'old friends' has focused on the belief that a series of trade deals could be quickly concluded across the 'Anglosphere' once the UK leaves the EU.

To this end, senior government figures made high-profile visits to Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as India (sometimes included amongst Anglosphere states). During a visit to the United States in January 2017, May and President Trump declared a shared commitment to reframe the 'special relationship' after Brexit. They emphasised that stronger ties would be founded 'on the bonds of history, of family, kinship and common interests'.

Future

There is evidence that the Anglosphere resonates with the British public, especially 'Leave' voters.⁵ Yet there are significant barriers to realising the Anglosphere vision. There was and remains a lack of agreement regarding the constituent states of Anglosphere. Many of the most vocal proponents have sought to frame the Anglosphere around a network of core constituent 'Crown countries' that comprise of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK (or 'CANZUK'). Others, notably Liam Fox, sought to frame the Anglosphere in terms of a new Anglo-American alliance re-asserting its global dominance. Outside of these so-called 'core' Anglophone states, it remains unclear what place there is in the Anglosphere for states such as India, Ireland, Singapore or South Africa.

The immediate diplomatic goal for UK-based Anglospherists as the UK exits the EU is to line up new free-trade agreements to soften the economic rupture as and when the UK leaves the Single Market. To this end, UK government ministers have stressed that Australia, Canada and New Zealand are (all) 'at the front of the queue' once Brexit is realised and any transitional phase has passed.

Some have questioned the professed benefits of new trade deals across the Anglosphere. At a conference exploring 'The Anglosphere and its Others' held at the British Academy in June 2017,⁶ Professor John Ravenhill and Professor Geoff Heubner noted that Brexit went against the global trend of the regional integration of national economies. With regards to the economic potential of the Anglosphere, Ravenhill and Heubner noted that 'geography trumps history'. The challenge for the

UK government, they concluded, is not to agree 'better' free-trade agreements with core Anglosphere states, but simply to replicate the terms and number of existing deals the UK enjoyed as a member of the EU.

For many British proponents, greater engagement with the Anglosphere is congruent with a desire to rejuvenate the Commonwealth through the development of trade links with emerging economic 'powerhouses', particularly India. Such intentions reveal, however, historical and contemporary complexities, both in geopolitical relations between the core Anglosphere states, and in the pervasive resonance of the issues of racism and neocolonialism across other parts of the former British Empire. The UK government's trade mission to India in November 2016 revealed the tensions around establishing new trading relationships and any reciprocal movement of labour that such agreements might entail.

Conversely, some Commonwealth leaders have expressed doubts regarding the possibility that new trade deals with the UK could have a detrimental impact on their own economies, stimulating memories of the exploitative nature of empire. For some, the post-Brexit 'Global Britain' vision is akin to 'Empire 2.0'. Indian MP Shashi Tharoor has argued that the post-Brexit UK government appears to suffer from a nostalgia-infused post-imperial 'amnesia' that negates engaging with its post-colonial responsibilities.⁷ British historian, David Olusoga, concurs, noting that plans for Britain's post-Brexit trading relationship with the Commonwealth are informed by a nostalgic yearning for wealth and global influence which is more akin to a 'neo-colonial fantasy'.⁸

Advocates of the Anglosphere appear to blend imperial nostalgia with historical myopia in their projection of an overly positive and largely uncritical view of the legacies of the British colonial past. Yet it is the memory of empire and the relationship of nationalism to it that presents one of the major barriers to the Anglosphere vision. British Anglosphere advocates stress the importance of a common past with Canada, Australia and New Zealand. However, shared sentiment amongst the populations of the Anglosphere states that they were 'made in England' has diminished and fractured considerably in the wake of successive waves of immigration. Moreover, intensely national conversations about questions of citizenship, identity and community rarely invoke Anglosphere links, particularly in their consideration of the devastating impact of colonisation and settlement on indigenous populations.

5. YouGov, September 2016.

6. The British Academy Conference on 'The Anglosphere and its Others: The "English-speaking Peoples" in a Changing World Order', held on 15–16 June 2017, was convened by Professor Michael Kenny, Dr Andrew Mycock and Dr Ben Wellings.

7. Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India* (Hurst Publishers, 2017).

8. David Olusoga, 'Empire 2.0 is dangerous nostalgia for something that never existed', *Guardian* (19 March 2017).

IMAGE: © NEW STATESMAN.



Conclusion

The future of the Anglosphere will succeed or flounder on the fragile and precarious grip on power of Theresa May's minority government. The possibility of a future Labour government under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn could encourage a very different Anglosphere; one based on humanitarianism, diplomacy and co-operation, yet rejecting the Anglosphere's 'liberal interventionism' strongly associated with Tony Blair's period in office.

This noted, the dominant form of Anglospherism in the UK remains strongly associated with antipathy towards the EU. But British proponents are guilty of prioritising British national self-interest while overlooking the diverse geopolitical and economic interests of the other Anglosphere states. Ultimately it is unlikely that political elites in Canberra, Ottawa or Wellington will risk damaging current or developing trade relations with the EU by prioritising trade deals with the UK.

This does not mean a post-Brexit intensification of the Anglosphere will materialise once the terms of

the UK's departure from the EU are agreed. Certainly it is likely that the UK government will prioritise a series of bilateral trade deals across the Anglosphere – in part through economic necessity, but also to legitimate Brexit to domestic businesses and voters. Moreover, counter-terrorism will continue to legitimate and strengthen ties between the 'Five Eyes' states. However, distinctive regional contexts and economic interests, together with a shared ascription to the defence of national sovereignty, will encourage pragmatism and stymie calls by Anglospherists for closer political ties.

This noted, the UK needs friends, and therein lies the appeal of the Anglosphere amongst Brexiters. The Anglosphere is an idea with a long provenance in British politics. But although it is currently enjoying another moment in the sun, its future is less clear. Anglosphere proponents see a 'move forward into broad, sunlit uplands', but it may yet be 'one with Nineveh and Tyre'. ■