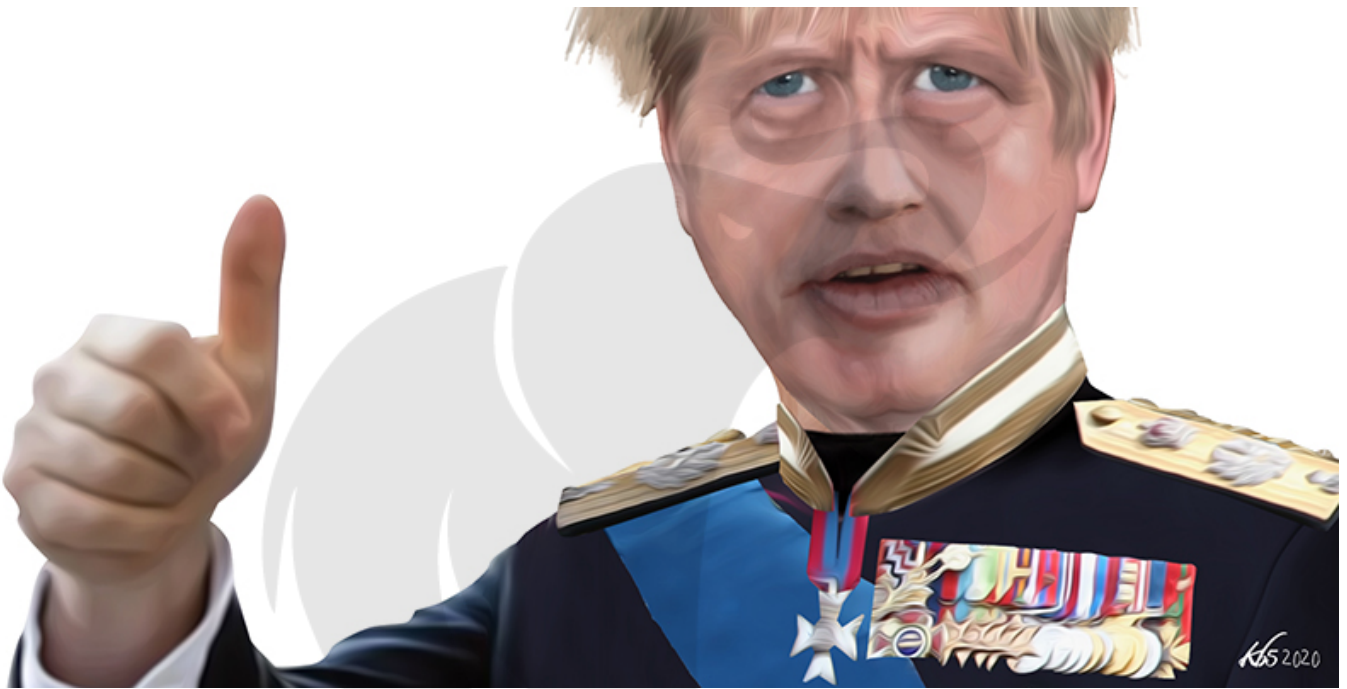




Invoking Empire in the Face of Collapse: A Dangerous Nostalgia

By Kalundi Serumaga



Sajjabi, say Baganda, liwoomera ku ngabo.

Loosely translated: “He may be a bad person, but he sure is sweet with a shield (i.e. a real asset in battle)”, or even: “Horses for courses”, as the English might say.

On July 7th Boris Johnson announced his resignation as UK Prime Minister. He will formally leave office in a matter of weeks. Johnson becomes the third Conservative Party British Prime Minister to resign from the post in six years, and the fourth in twelve. The process of replacing him is underway, from a choice of candidates no better, and in some cases, worse, than he is.

So far, his party, elected to government in 2010, has managed to retain power even while shedding party leaders who, under the British system, become Prime Minister.

This is the latest development in a cascade of events triggered by the 2016 decision to hold a referendum on Brexit—whether Britain should exit her 40-year membership of the European Union or not.

The referendum itself was a product of earlier developments, namely the attempt to manage the political turmoil caused by the long overdue 2008 economic crash, which triggered a panicky “do

something” mentality among the political and media classes.

Basically, it amounted to blaming the country’s current economic woes on Britain’s membership of the European Union. The Labour Party’s Gordon Brown, who had inherited the post from the long-serving Tony Blair and with it the downside of Blair’s artificial economic growth, had failed—since he had served as finance minister under Blair—to distance himself from the rising economic drama, going on to lose his parliamentary majority in the 2010 election. Gordon resigned and the Conservative Party formed a coalition government with other parties.

The British public and establishment both could hardly say much else; there are no other explanations, palatable to them, for their current mess.

It can be very hard to recognise a collapse from the inside, but the fact is that economics over there is dead, and this has thrown its avatar called politics into turmoil. And it is no longer politics. It is the ghost of politics: it cannot explain the economic crisis; it cannot listen to experts on the matter of the climate emergency; it cannot even fix basic service and infrastructure problems.

Mistaking motion for progress, David Cameron, after renewing his mandate following an election that gave him full control of government, eventually decided to use it to end the “blame the European Union” debate. Hence the referendum. Unfortunately, only erroneous information was available for the subsequent discourse, and the result was Brexit: a decision to leave the European Union and the vote that got rid of Cameron. There followed a messy parliamentary process to turn Brexit into international and domestic law that got rid of his successor Theresa May, and finally a law in need of implementation that has bedevilled Boris Johnson.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic only served to delay and to distract from this process. But the day came when the confused anger of the British public about why they are so poor while living in the world’s 5th richest country felled another leader.

The underlying purpose to all this manoeuvring had always been one: a mobilisation necessary for the isolation and defeat of alternative ideas that were beginning to take root in the population and eventually found organised expression through a tendency to the left that soon took leadership of the main opposition Labour Party under the beleaguered leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. For all his perceived shortcomings, Corbyn came across as a person with a real understanding of the deteriorating living conditions of ordinary people, and a genuine belief that another way was possible.

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You see, the most contentious question at the heart of British politics for nearly two centuries has been about the best way to distribute the proceeds from their expanding global economic earnings that up to now are a significant contributor to the “British” economy. The birth of the Labour Party in 1900 was the ultimate political product of those contestations.

Corbyn tried to reclaim that old Labour Party from the Blair legacy that had merely been an adaptation to the new economic and political realities began and imposed in the 1980s neo-liberal era under then Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Had Corbyn succeeded, it would have amounted to a near-complete reversal of Thatcherism. A surrender. The mission of the entire political establishment, aided by the corporate media, was and

is to defend the Thatcherite neo-liberal ring for as long as possible, that's all. So Corbyn was vilified, and a national myth, amounting to a dangerous nostalgia, and a distraction from truth, which is its intention, was promoted instead.

This meant the British excavating all those elements of nostalgia that could be safely invoked for the purpose of making them feel good—without exposing the historical seedy underbelly of Empire—as a cultural ploy. Johnson was the perfect tool for this: embodying a pandering to imagery and language rooted in a comforting cultural ecology reminiscent of the Billy Bunter cartoon character and the whole anachronistic Harry Potter ethos.

But British/English identity is a construct of the imperial class. The then nascent bourgeois classes of Western Europe developed two key institutions: exclusive schools and the armed forces, which in turn created a cadre template invested in racism, class aspiration, greed, callousness, cynicism and a fundamentally dishonest ethos. Basically what one would need to be in order to conquer much of the world.

All the branches of the British state have always had such people in senior management.

In this sense, anyone can become, or at least aspire to become a part of the British management class; you just need to have attended the institutions that teach these values. Boris Johnson was perfect for the task then at hand: a classic neophyte, being descended from (white) immigrants himself—neophytes are always more fanatical than the originators.

There is a lot of historical precedence to this. What the English present as a scamp and “naughty boy” is actually a dangerous sociopath. There have been plenty of them. There were the 16th Century sea pirates Sir Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, licenced to pillage by Queen Elizabeth I. There was the consummate conman known as the African explorer Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), as well as Robert Clive (1725-1774) whose licenced colonial British East India Company gave a whole new meaning (and even word: “loot”) to the practice of mass murder and plunder. In many cases, they are discarded and disgraced once they are no longer useful: Raleigh ended up being executed by the very state he had once served, and Clive committed suicide years after being accused in parliament of having enriched himself at the expense of the country. Now Boris Johnson has also been dumped.

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The rest of the candidates to replace him are largely ideologically the same. Just not necessarily white-skinned immigrants like him. They are made up of the very people who forced Johnson to quit after seeing that his devotion to scandal would likely be a liability at the next election.

Of the few non-whites that have also aspired to premiership—and one remains in the running—their only real challenge is how sellable their dark skins are to the wider electorate that has historically been indoctrinated to dislike, despise and distrust non-white people.

However, therein lies the hypocrisy. Whatever their skin-colour, none should pretend that they did not know exactly who Johnson was; they did. And what he was, was exactly what they needed to fight off Corbyn's socialism at the time: a typical specimen of English nastiness as perfected by the English middle classes, the cleverest part of which is pretending not to know how nasty they are, and the damage their nastiness has inflicted on those subjected to it.

Whoever replaces him will do no better in substance. It will just be a change in style. What we are witnessing with the ruling Conservative party is not a party problem. Because the issues they are faced with are not personal to Johnson; trying to personalise the crisis to Johnson—whose character was already a matter of long-standing public discourse well before he became prime minister—or even to his party, is actually very disingenuous. First, because, as I have said, they needed such a person to deliver the fullness of Brexit. Secondly, because this crisis is not a problem of his party alone; they are problems of the entire British political system as it stands (any of the major parties, if in power, would have been split by Brexit) and of the economic arrangements on which it stands and is expected to manage.

In short, what Britain is faced with is a Great Unravelling, with political, social, economic, constitutional crises coming at once. Key questions, such as the rising cost of living, Brexit's disruption of travel and commerce with the European landmass, and a looming break-up of the kingdom by those countries within it that wished to remain in the European Union but were outvoted by the much larger, specifically English, ethnic population, are all now beyond the ability of "normal" politics to resolve.

All this is because the problem really began between the 1940s and the 1960s, when the formal British Empire began to dissolve but the UK's rulers failed to wean themselves and their populations off the standards of living they had derived from it, even as that wealth diminished. This broke the social democratic compact, which is what Thatcherism was about: the pie to be shared out had become smaller, so if it was to come down to a choice between enabling the continuance of private profit-making from overseas or creating a more egalitarian state at home, then the needs of the masses would have to be dumped from public policy budgets.

You see, "politics" is about the management of the economically-created social dynamics of society. When there is no economics to manage (or it has gone beyond the possibilities of management), then there can be no sensible politics. It becomes un-anchored.

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The United Kingdom economic crisis is real, is severe, and cannot be fixed within their preferred frame of thinking. And, by keeping this current course, it is also going to be terminal.

Clearly, the only way out of this is to discuss the redistribution pattern of existing wealth created by the UK, but the epic stubbornness of the English ruling class will ensure that this does not happen; they will doggedly soldier on regardless of the damage they may cause to their own society, other societies, and the global natural environment.

The extent to, and ruthlessness with which, the Jeremy Corbyn faction and agenda were discredited and suppressed by the state and corporate media, and even by the Labour Party's internal administration itself, shows how determined those who really run Britain are to maintain this direction against all odds.

Keir Starmer, the establishment journeyman politician installed into the Labour Party leadership from where he has hounded the Corbynite, may follow. He was nothing more than a blocker; a place-holder. Unless (or perhaps even if) Corbynite ideas persist among the masses in an organised way, he is also no longer needed.

So, it is a crisis specifically of England, the ground-zero of the British Empire project, and of

England's Englishness.

The only way to get out of this, would be for them to stop being the English invented by the empire and rediscover how to simply be a people.

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