



Brexit, Little Britain and the Empire Politics of the End

By Kalundi Serumaga



The decade-long death march of Western capitalism continues to reap yet more victims. The latest is the British political establishment and the remnants of the Empire that created it.

The problem for the key actors, dwarfed as they are by a venerable political system they inherited from the time of their great-great grandparents when it yielded exclusionary benefits, is their inability to grasp that Brexit, the current crisis with which it is grappling, does not signal a change. It is an ending. Misreading the situation, the said actors continue to dream up remedies and strategies based on the vain assumption that the economic crisis will somehow be resolved by political initiatives.

The lone survivor may well end up being Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the official opposition Labour Party, and then only because he never believed in the virtues of western capitalism to begin with. He sees his mission more in terms of how to cater to the needs of all capitalism's damaged survivors.

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The vast majority of British people are not wealthy. They merely live within a rich economy that provides them access to credit. For at least 350 years, the British economy expanded through the [ruthless exploitation of resources and people](#) from many parts of the world. The big question then, as now, was: who benefits, and how?

In his 1964 book, *The Sins of the Fathers*, James Pope-Hennessy explains that:

“Shipbuilding in Liverpool was gloriously stimulated by the slave trade, and so was every other ancillary industry connected with ships..... People used to say that ‘several of the principal streets of Liverpool had been marked out by the chains, and the walls of the houses cemented by the blood of the African slaves.’ The Customs House sported carvings of Negroes’ heads...”

The most contentious question at the core of British politics has always been the question of the domestic distribution of the proceeds of that global trade.

In particular the history of the social democratic movement in the UK, which culminates in the formation in 1900 of the Labour Party, has been the history of developing more efficient ways of systematically redistributing Empire’s wealth as it comes in. These initiatives culminate in the establishment of the provision of mass housing (1935), education (1944) and health (1946) as a clear statutory requirement, after the 1939-1945 war, and the economic crisis that preceded it. These three policies alone immeasurably changed the quality of life for ordinary British people, and are now the site of the ideological battleground between the main parties, regarding how best to “fix” the country’s crisis.

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Since the failure to recover from the 2008 economic crash, politics seems to have become an exercise in which everyone questions the legitimacy and role of every other participant. Empire’s redistributive template is being challenged from all angles: ordinary citizens challenge the corporate world regarding the rates of tax it pays to keep public services running; the corporate world in turn challenges the logic of ordinary people continuing to expect that such services should be provided for free and on demand; indigenous people begin to question why immigrants have the right to move in and partake of such services; the provincial regions begin to question why major infrastructural development tends to be focused on the major urban centres, and so on.

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The latest development in these establishment contestations is the resignation of seven MPs from the Labour Party, and declaring themselves “independent”. They were soon joined by an eighth Labour MP, and then by four members of the ruling Conservative Party. There is every indication that there will be more resignations from both parties; some of these MPs will likely join the new group. This attempted re-alignment of Britain’s 150-year-old effectively two-party system may

amount to little in itself, but will in the long-term, prove to be hugely significant.

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This is in fact a debate about the future, paralysed by the past.

Britain sidestepped an obligation to undertake a principled and genuine retreat from Empire. Such a retreat would have entailed a costly reckoning with history. Empire's unravelling came with huge costs: there was the risk of being forced into making material reparations to the colonies and descendants of those enslaved in the Trans-Atlantic trade; downsizing and restructuring her global corporate reach would have meant a significant reduction in income; and weaning her domestic population off the proceeds of Empire's profits could have led to sharp political disruptions. Instead, Britain embarked on a series of pretend "withdrawals" and resorted to all manner of skullduggery so as to maintain back-channel influence and continue profiteering.

By postponing this decision, Britain now faces a stark question: how does she retain her economic pre-eminence? Is it by cleaving unto an ever-tighter embrace with the European Union, or independently returning to her own stall in the global marketplace, which first gave her pre-eminence?

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This is the dilemma expressing itself as the Brexit crisis, essentially the failure by the entire political leadership to manage the consequences of the 2016 referendum, in which UK citizens — by a small margin, it should be noted — voted to end their country's 45-year membership of the European Union.

That referendum itself only came about as a consequence of then UK Prime Minister David Cameron's bungling attempts to end dissent in his ruling Conservative Party. He sought to outflank growing voices from the Tory right wing insistent that a new type of Conservative Party was necessary to make Britain "great" again, not least by severing its links with the European Union, which they characterized as the source of unwanted immigrants, and a drain on the UK's "hard-earned" Empire wealth. Cameron, shocked by the unexpected referendum result, resigned immediately, leaving the problem to his successor, current PM Theresa May.

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adrift from its ideological moorings, following its many years in opposition after its 1979 defeat by the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. Originally, Labour was committed to the goals of a form of socialism: nationalisation of key sectors of the economy; widespread provision of social services and amenities as well as a safety net; and protection of workers' rights to organize, assemble and agitate. Following a second defeat to Thatcher in 1983, a number of reformist party leaders like Neil Kinnock, began to reshape the party's orientation while still in opposition. "Socialist" policies were progressively abandoned over the following decade and a half, as they became increasingly unsellable to the electorate, not least because of the pernicious influence of a corporate media hostile both to the Party and its policies, and the victory of Thatcherite neoliberalism as the dominant policy mantra across the political establishment. This paved the way for Tony Blair to emerge as a new type of Labour leader, and lead the reformed party — now freed of its previous ideological commitments and Trade Union obligations — back into power in 1997.

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Despite this, the ideological debate within Labour never completely ended. Many radicals blamed the party's inability to recover quickly from the loss of the 1979 election on the narrow defeat of the radical Tony Wedgewood Benn in the deputy party leadership vote, in 1981. With the collapse of neoliberal economics after 2008, some of the old "socialist" ideas have experienced a resurgence. It is this that has brought current leader Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran of the futile 1980s battles to keep the party "socialist", to the leadership. In fact, a number of the key actors in Corbyn's camp — including Corbyn himself — were active pro-Tony Benn youth wingers back then.

Despite all those struggles, such "progressive" politics, directed from this "distributionist" framework never quite explained where the wealth to be distributed would come from, especially if Empire's global resources were no longer available.

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In a UK *Guardian* article of September 22, 2011, British Admiral Lord Alan West was quoted criticising proposed cuts to the UK defence budget:

"We are probably, depending on what figures you use, the fifth or sixth wealthiest nation in the world. We have the largest percentage of our GDP on exports ... we run world shipping from the UK, we are the largest European investor in south Asia, south-east Asia [and] the Pacific Rim, so our money and our wealth depends on this global scene."

This is why retaining a presence in the European Union is important to the UK establishment, which believes it would offset any contraction of the Empire economy as it tries to deliver on its redistributive "socialist" ideals. Even this may not work, as it is a strategy still premised, however indirectly, on the wealth generated by Empire.

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The central question, that is, the question concerning a long-term post-Empire economic strategy, goes back over 30 years, and has never been settled. It was only temporarily resolved by the rule of Margaret Thatcher. Faced with an EU demand then for greater economic integration against a growing domestic chorus to double-down and go it completely alone, the British, being British, attempted to do both. This left the UK with a somewhat hybridized EU membership. Unlike the rest of the Union for example, Britain kept her own currency.

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Now the matter has returned to centre stage, not least due to the economic hardships bedevilling the EU's 500 million citizens. The crisis has arrived at a time when politics in Britain is being managed by a generation of people dwarfed by their own legacy. Since at least the time of [Gladstone](#) in the 1860s, the British political system has been premised on managing the proceeds of an empire-based economy. The crisis therefore, goes to the heart of how British economics, and therefore politics, is constituted.

The end of Empire has been a prolonged period of discomfort, and left a wrong political fit. Those days, and the formations they spawned, are now over. The whole construct and edifice — the buildings, institutions, traditions, imperatives — are not fit for current purpose. So, the government system, which includes the official Opposition, is obsolete. Those were Empire-level political initiatives to keep the masses happy with their share of the spoils.

The current leaders on all sides seem incapable of understanding the full meaning of the weight of all that history, and so what is happening in the UK parliament is a splintering of the old order, but one which carries the misconceptions of that old order into the new.

In particular, Empire's racial politics that played out in the colonies and was previously viewed with a certain metropolitan hauteur from London, became increasingly domesticated after decolonisation. At home, racial politics spawned a new lexicon, and new hitherto unfamiliar actors, both of which ended up in Empire's parliament pursuing identity politics as a new dimension to the aforementioned politics of redistribution.

But real change will not come through thinking and speaking from the platform of Empire's institutions. It cannot be re-ordered, or have its wrongs put right, from those pedestals.

The truth is that the 2016 referendum was not a decisive outcome. For a matter of that magnitude, a nearly 50/50 result cannot be said to be a clear "rejection" of anything. By the same token, neither can it be said to be an acceptance of the status quo.

The logical thing on paper would be to hold another referendum. However, given the polarized nature of the debate, as well as the real economic pain ordinary British people are experiencing, this would likely split both main parties internally. There is a strong suspicion that step three for the

recently resigned MPs will be an attempt to create a new party, that would move to displace the current official opposition, in anticipation of the looming internal splits.

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This, however, is to still miss the point.

What was important was the spread of the result. England, by far the most populous of the three national regions, voted most clearly to leave the EU. But again, this was outside the main urban concentrations (where a lot of non-indigenous minorities are to be found). While Wales voted alongside England, Scotland voted solidly to remain.

Instead of dealing with the implications of the result, all the other political factions appear strangely to have perceived their immediate task as being to prevent a Corbyn-led Labour Party from taking power. Corbyn espouses a fundamentally different agenda than the conventional mainstream: he wants a redistribution of the wealth of the country among a much wider demographic, through nationalization, and the massive expansion of social services. For Corbyn therefore, the issue of Brexit is secondary. He intends to pursue his programme regardless of whether Britain remains in the EU or not. But such economic plans are inimical to the now 40-year orthodoxy established by Margaret Thatcher, and injected into the Labour party by Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair.

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The fault line in this political quagmire is both factions of the Conservative Party, plus the Tony Blair remnants (and they are many) in the Labour party being on one ideological side, against Jeremy Corbyn's faction of the party.

This will be a battle huge and distracting in equal measure.

First, it will keep British politics bogged down in a debate about the best distribution of Admiral West's Empire proceeds, a lot of which is backstopped through the European Union's "Economic Partnership Agreements" signed with much of the so-called "developing" world - that is, the old colonial world of Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Asia. The EPAs are basically the modern form of the unfair trade treaties of the last five centuries. Their most disruptive feature was 'conditionality': the overweening donor influence on where and how 'aid' is spent, and a heavy focus on private sector participation in 'development'.

On the domestic political front, the threat of Corbyn implementing his redistribution agenda after the UK exits the EU,, would profoundly disrupt established corporate interests.

Third, given the historical economic pressure created by the emergence of other global economic players, it is inevitable that the UK will see her share of the spoils progressively decline. The reality of this permanent decline will then be used to drag the likes of Corbyn into a jingoistic debate about British "greatness" (which, incidentally, is built on a fallacious premise: what right does the UK have to global pre-eminence, and how is that pre-eminence to be kept in place anyway?).

Many of the current round of EPAs (negotiated for twenty-year periods), are due to expire between 2020 and 2025. Would a Corbyn government design their renegotiation to better reflect the principles of fair trade, a condition of staying in the EU? If so, would the EU want the UK back as a member?

Being in the EU has failed to suppress the UK establishment's nostalgic fantasies of the return of Empire. Understanding this is to recognise that the nature of Britain's current politics has no answers for the future. To confront the future would first require a recognition that the global Empire economy, which the EU also feeds off of, must be restructured in favour of a global fair trade regime, whether the UK in all or in part remains inside the EU.

Whether within the EU or out of it, Britain remains the fifth richest country in the world due to a legacy of malfeasance. Britain's current political order is being dismantled by the force of this legacy; the current leaders know neither how to maintain their global advantage, nor how to make an orderly withdrawal from it.

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This essentially means that the 2016 referendum produced three or four outcomes, not one.

For the British people then to be able to speak, the creation of an ENGLISH parliament is imperative. This is a call that comes up from time to time, but is then ridiculed and silenced.

However, before England became "the first, and the most deeply penetrated of all the British colonies" to quote Oscar Wilde, England's Kingdoms did often have their own parliaments, such as the Anglo-Saxon *Witangemot* that operated between the 7th and 11th centuries.

Only after this democratisation process can Britain have a meaningful referendum in which each region decides for itself and negotiates to stay or go independently of the others.

Whether Britain were to have become a full member of the EU, or to have completely broken away from it, a central truth remains: this is actually the end of an epoch. The unravelling of the UK's political system is part of it.

Only after Britain democratises her politics can she have a meaningful referendum in which each region decides for itself and negotiates to stay or go independently of the others.

THIS is ending.

The world will go on.

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