



WHAT

Brexit: the process by which the United Kingdom intends to remove itself from the EU



WHEN

The decision to exit the EU was taken on June 23, 2016, when the British held a referendum



HOW

Negotiations began on June 19, 2017, and are expected to continue for up to 2 years



WHO

Prime Minister Theresa May leads the negotiations after winning a slim majority



impressions

ESSAY

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WIL ROACH

‘We are here because you were there,’ is a simple explanation of race relations in Britain today in the aftermath of its colonial past – and a view held by many descendants of families who suffered under that regime.

The quote comes from the late renowned sociologist and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, writing for a three-screen gallery piece titled, ‘Unfinished Conversation,’

shown at Tate Britain three years ago. He was enunciating the view held by Britons whose cultural backgrounds range from across the broad geographical range of the

former British Empire, from India to the West Indies and Australia in the southern Pacific Ocean.

In my view, Hall’s pithy sentence

‘ In the light of Britain’s latest political development racism is looking even more respectable ’

sums up the often troubled but sometimes fruitful co-existence that persists to this day, between those in England who regard themselves as the embodiment of English values, customs and culture and those who like myself – and hundreds of thousands of other immigrants – have been viewed as out-staying our welcome. Yet there is an urgent conversation needed about whether the status quo on English identity will persist or eventually give way to one of those fruitful moments in the history of England and the rest of the Kingdom, when a richer and inclusive English story unfolds.

Now in the light of Britain's latest political development – the resounding turning against the Conservatives in the country's general election – racism is looking even more respectable.

After the June 19, 2017 Finsbury Park, London mosque bombing, the Labour Party warned of a rise in Islamophobia. The extent to which racism underlies fear of extremist Islam remains problematic. (Boyle, Graham, Millward)

In rolling out stricter security measures in the heightened atmosphere of extremist attacks, there's the danger that non-white-skinned Britons will be targeted by security agencies and forces.

Prime Minister Theresa May announced in June 2017: 'It is time to say enough is enough. Everybody needs to go about their lives as they normally would. Our society should continue to function in accordance with our values.'

On the face of it, no one would argue with the advice. But her following statement edges closer to what some might question are those values: 'While we have made significant progress in recent years, there is – to be frank – far too much tolerance of extremism in our country.' (Chandler) This in a country that has formerly prided itself on the freedom of speech afforded by its commitment to the liberalism of its parliamentary democracy (at least as written in statutes).

The United Kingdom voted on 23 June last year in a referendum to leave the 28-member European Union (EU) after 40 years of membership. In the lead up to the



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referendum – which had long been promised by then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron – the campaigns to remain or leave were fought hard by coalitions of politicians from all main parties. In the aftermath of a referendum campaign that so stirred national and local sentiment, an ugly result is the dramatic increase in reports of hate crime.

Hate Crimes are defined by True Vision (a police-funded website which gives information about hate crimes and how to report them) as: 'any crimes that are targeted at a person because of hostility or prejudice towards that person's disability, race or ethnicity, religion or belief, sexual orientation, transgender identity'.

Police reports on hate crimes released before and after the referendum campaign showed there'd been a marked increase in attacks against people from Eastern European countries and/or non-white UK citizens. The reported number of hate crime 'recorded for the last two weeks in June (2016) had spiked by 42 per cent on this time last year', according to a later report. A total of 3,076 incidents were recorded across the country between 16 and

30 June, a significant increase on the 915 incidents recorded over the same period in 2015. There was a sharp increase in the number of racially or religiously aggravated crimes recorded by police in England and Wales following the EU referendum. In July 2016, police recorded a 41 per cent increase compared to the same month the year before, according to a Home Office report. (Forster)

Understandably, this has heightened concern at what the future holds with regard to a national adherence to non-violence – whether you are an immigrant or not, and considering the co-operation needed leading up to Brexit negotiations and after the exit. (Stone)

Is it an acceptable conclusion that the figures indicate increased hate or xenophobia towards not only recent immigrants, such as Eastern European EU citizens, but also long-settled communities of immigrants from former British colonies, including their children's children born in the UK and calling no other country home.

One might conclude that this year's statistics are a once-in-a-lifetime temporary explosion of anger and heated

First generation immigrants England as the 'Mother Country'

'The Englishman has no love for the coloured man and the feeling is mutual.'

A first impression from Clifford Roach, who moved to London in the early 1960s.



passions on both sides of the immigration argument which reached boiling point, and that now the result is known, the multi-cultural fabric of the nation will be mended. We will see ...

After all, in Brussels on June 19, British and EU Brexit negotiators only just began to agree on how to organise their talks within the constraints of complexity and deadlines. And the conclusion of the complex negotiations will take a minimum of 2 years to complete. Indeed there may be some grounds for optimism as a recent police report indicated that hate crime reporting figures have returned to pre-referendum levels. Though it is worth noting that neither this report nor the earlier hate crime reporting figures referred to above give any indication of the outcome of police investigations or whether anyone has

been prosecuted. It needs to be acknowledged that any hate crime, reported as prosecuted or not, is one too many.

If we look back, we may see the genesis of contemporary events post-referendum – touched on at the start of this article in Hall's comment, 'We are here, because you were there' – in the disconnect between immigrants' skin colour and culture, which is a reflection of the concept of 'alien' to a mindset that still has an unerring and nostalgic attachment to an idea of the British Empire as a 'civiliser'. The result of England having conquered other countries is that the first generation of pioneering immigrants – in my case from Trinidad and Tobago – arrived in Britain, often with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many settled in a harsh physical and racial environment and succeeded in holding on

to see their children and grandchildren flourish. You may ask at what cost, but that's a story for another day. I believe that the post-Second World War immigration turmoil, from the 1960s right through to today, is a reflection of a deeply conflicted sense of English identity being challenged by a redefinition, as a product of what immigrants have created. They've created a different England, being non-violent, adaptable, hard-working and having commitment to the country they once knew as the 'Mother Country'.

The 'Leave' campaign seemed to have caught the imagination of large swathes of the UK. Scotland and London remained loyal to continued membership of the EU, while most of the rest of the country voted decisively to discontinue membership. The prevailing and dominant theme of the 'Leave' campaign was a conflation of asylum seekers and immigrants, and how ultimately immigration would forever change the culture and character of England. The focus was on recent migrants from Eastern European countries who might have the right to live and work in the UK for years to come.

Yet is this pessimistic, nationalistic view of immigration a recent development? The optimists might say that UK has always been a tolerant country and accepting of outsiders. It might be posited that the unprecedented increase in the last ten years of EU citizens allowed to live and work in the UK has posed intolerable strain, particularly on the multicultural settlement of earlier immigrant arrivals such as from the ex-colonies of the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, East Africa and other former colonies. Yet there is a view that this is too forgiving of the anti-immigrant attitude, and simplistic. The UK has long had a troubled relationship with outsiders and for a very good reason, and that is because of having had an Empire and lost it.

I have personal experience of this as a child of immigrants, as I cast my mind back to my father's arrival from Trinidad to London in the early 1960s. He wrote letters to my mother, in the months following his arrival in September 1961, saying, "The

The author Wil Roach

Wil was a child of immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago. He grew up in Wembley, London, and Bristol, and has worked in community development and with NGOs, specialising in assistance for people with disabilities. He moved to Australia and now lives in Sydney.



Englishman has no love for the coloured man and the feeling is mutual. I do not like them either. I have decided to return home.’

My impression was that the warm welcome he and others expected to receive from the Empire’s ‘Mother Country’ was dishonoured in racism and ostracism for them and their children. Despite the disappointment and hardship, Dad stayed in London and Mum and I joined him almost a year later, in August 1962.

I think that a possible explanation in the upsurge in hate crime in Britain is to be found in the character of England itself. The Guardian newspaper review of the noted British novelist Martin Amis’s BBC Four documentary, ‘Martin Amis’s England,’ says that Amis, ‘has suggested that having white skin is still widely perceived as a core part of being English,’ adding that austerity has sent multiculturalism into decline. (Richard Lea and Josh Halliday)

A subtler view reflected in an obituary of Stuart Hall, who died in February 2014, cites Hall declaring, ‘[England] was never a society without conflict. The English fought tooth and nail over everything we know as English political virtues – rule of law, free speech, the franchise.’ Hall introduces the chimera of Empire and Imperialism: ‘The very notion of Great Britain’s “greatness” is bound up with empire.’ (Hall)

After more than 70 years, since the end of the Second World War and Britain’s loss of empire, there has been, in my opinion, a continual tension within England’s

view of its place in the world. The tension is found in the view that Britishness is best represented by the English values that Hall referred to and that Europe was never a legitimate equal in that conversation. It might be considered that neither the Conservative nor the Labour governments that governed over those seven decades ever truly spoke the language of English virtues, less still promoted them, in their dealings with Europe. Former Conservative Party leaders and Prime Ministers such as Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath certainly believed in a phrase most recently used by David Cameron that the UK needed to be ‘at the heart of Europe.’ This was clearly not a view shared by the majority of his colleagues or party members. During her 15 years as leader and Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher captured that yearning in her party and in England, for a pragmatic relationship in trade and security matters, with no backsliding that would lead to the UK being forced to join a federal European Union project, that would shred any illusion that the country had unfettered control of its destiny.

A man who could be viewed as Mrs Thatcher’s political godfather, the late Conservative politician Enoch Powell, certainly set the tone of how we got to where we are now, in his explosive speech to a meeting of local conservatives on April 20 1968 in the Birmingham Mail. (Richards)

Powell said he was ‘filled with foreboding; like the Roman I seem to see the River

Tiber foaming with much blood.’ With that speech he destroyed his political career, but it set off a political and cultural firestorm that has only just subsided with the referendum result. From 1968 to the present day, immigration has continued to vex the Conservative Party with the sentiments, if not the belief, that Powell was right and that mass immigration (yesterday from ex colonies, today from Eastern Europe) would irrevocably change the culture of England and undermine those English virtues Hall referred to. Mrs Thatcher focused resolutely on articulating this view, perhaps giving credence to a view of English exceptionalism that every major party politician who followed her has found hard to carry forward in their authentic political philosophy.

What perhaps was an unspoken understanding of the English character by most of the political class (excluding Mrs Thatcher) was that oil and water do not mix, but it was never to be repeated or acted upon. In his documentary, Martin Amis captured the disdain that had not been uttered widely in a comment about, ‘a Pakistani in Preston who says “I am an Englishman”’. He said that statement ‘would raise eyebrows for the reason that there’s an unspoken layer to being English’. He cited qualifications other than being a citizen of the country, that have to do with ‘white skin and the habits of what is regarded as civilised society, and recognisable bourgeois society’. (Amis)

Enoch Powell and Nigel Farage were ready to risk expulsion from the mainstream political establishment and lose the possibility of glittering prizes such as political office that temptingly await mainstream politicians. Both Powell and Farage were prepared to be the lonely voices in the wilderness and argue for a political view of England that was anathema to their mainstream colleagues. And their reading of the racism that underpins the sense of ‘Britishness’ [or Brutishness] paid off for them both.

When in 2010 there was proposal by the then Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove (a subsequent ‘Leave’ cam-

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paigner), to reflect a sunnier view of the British Empire in a proposed curriculum review, there was considerable opposition. Colin Jones, President of The Royal Historical Society, threw light on the tensions of Englishness and identity when he said in reference to Gove’s proposal, ‘If Britain had genuinely come to terms with its imperial history, no senior politician would have dared suggest celebrating it or mobilising apologists to sanitise its records for school children. Commentator Seamus Milne maintained that ‘there are now millions living in Britain whose families had direct experience of colonial tyranny’. (Milne)

It’s interesting to note, as a contrast to Jones’ view, that an opinion poll published UK-wide supported Gove’s view of the British Empire, concluding that British people were proud of colonialism and the British Empire. Strong evidence suggested, at the very least, entrenched and positive attitudes towards Empire not just in England but across the UK.

A clue to resolving the conflict and

tension between Britain’s identity of Empire and the contemporary reality of its multi-cultural and multi-racial society may be found in Stuart Hall’s critical question: ‘How much do we retain and how much do we give up our cultural identity in order to be ourselves. The concept of Britishness needs to become more not less inclusive. The idea of a multi-ethnic, mono-cultural society is a ‘contradiction in terms’. (Hall)

In conclusion, there is one vision of England’s destiny after the Brexit vote which is a victory and reinforcement of a mono-cultural society held together by common hegemonic values. That is, in the contribution and sacrifice of the English and those then English colonies to fight during the Second World War for the very English virtues referred to by Hall. Subsequent waves of immigrants have undoubtedly enriched this country as well as having drawn some benefits from those values. This English concept of mono-culture can be seen as being reinforced in the light of Prime Minister Theresa May’s comment

after the appalling June terror attack at Borough Market when she said, ‘We need to live our lives not in a series of separated, segregated communities, but as one truly United Kingdom (UK). ... Our society should continue to function in accordance with our values.’ (Chandler)

First, it is interesting to note that there is no longer a single British government but a devolved series of governments comprised of constituent countries of the UK, excluding England. Second, Mrs May does not tell us what ‘our values’ are – as if it were inherently understood what those values are.

On the other hand if we re-examine the contribution and sacrifice of the English, Welsh, Scots, Irish and former member populations of the British Empire further afield, their view of common identity is surely worth arguing and fighting for.