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The Brexit negotiations and the Anglosphere

Andrew Gamble

Abstract: The Brexit negotiations raise the question of what Britain's future role in the world should be. Brexiters have drawn on ideas of the Anglosphere to imagine what that future might be. The Anglosphere belongs in a long line of thinking about uniting English-speaking communities around the world. Different conceptions of the Anglosphere such as CANZUK are identified. The Anglosphere appeals to many Brexiters because it gives them a positive vision of Global Britain as an alternative to EU membership. The advantages to Britain of regaining full sovereignty and associating once more with its 'true friends' are stressed. What is ignored is the lack of support among Anglosphere countries for much closer relationships except in the security sphere, and the inability of increased economic ties with the Anglosphere to begin to match what the UK will lose by severing itself from its most important economic partner.

Keywords: Anglosphere, Brexit, CANZUK, Global Britain, EU, Trade

One of the big questions raised by the Brexit negotiations following the vote in the 2016 Referendum to leave the European Union, which reached their climax in December 2020, has been Britain's future place in the world. There had been similar uncertainty in the 1960s, but that had seemingly been resolved by the third and this time successful application by Britain to join the European Community. The decision to join was narrowly approved by Parliament and subsequently received belated popular legitimation through the 1975 referendum. It appeared to mark a decisive choice in favour of a European future for the United Kingdom. Churchill in 1948 had depicted Britain's position in the world as being at the heart of three interlinked circles:¹ the British Empire and Commonwealth, the English-speaking world (particularly the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), and United Europe. Britain was the only country with a significant part in all three. For Churchill Britain's role was to join the three circles together, creating a safe and happy future for humanity.

Events did not work out like that. The decline in British power, the increasing difficulties of the British economy and the winding down of the British Empire during the post-war decades forced Britain gradually to abandon a great power role and to adjust to a reduced status in the world. By the 1960s the two circles of Anglo-America and Europe had come to dominate thinking in the British political class about Britain's future role, and many concluded that Britain needed to choose between them. Under Edward Heath the Conservatives moved decisively to embrace a European future, accepting full participation in the process of European integration as the best way to secure British security and British prosperity. Anglo-America remained important but had a lower priority. In the decades that followed however successive British Governments proved reluctant to pursue full integration with Europe, and Britain gradually became semi-detached. The pull of Anglo-America re-asserted itself, and several British Prime Ministers gave greater priority to maintaining strong transatlantic ties with the United States than strengthening European ones. In domestic debate from the 1990s onwards Europe and America were often posed as two rival political, economic, social and cultural models, with Eurosceptic Conservatives and parts of the British media favouring closer ties with the United States and disparaging the European Union.² Divisions over Europe convulsed both parties but the Conservative party as the original European

party was particularly torn apart by a long and intense civil war over Europe which raged in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first.

The term, the Anglosphere, was first used in 1995 in a science fiction novel,³ and was then taken up in the 2000s by English Conservative Eurosceptics and American neo-conservatives. Its appeal to Eurosceptics was that it gave them a way of imagining a non-European future for the UK which drew on a rich heritage of earlier conceptions, including 'Greater Britain', 'The English-speaking peoples' and Imperial Federation.⁴ It seemed to offer an alternative role for Britain in the world which was not defined by its membership of the European Union. Few Eurosceptics in the 1990s and 2000s thought that leaving the European Union was achievable, but when it began to seem a possibility, after 2010, the appeal of the Anglosphere grew. It allowed Conservatives to oppose the European Union and even to advocate exit without abandoning the idea of an open Global Britain and lapsing into isolationism or nostalgia for Empire. The EU was portrayed as a closed, protectionist bloc which stifled freedom and initiative, and from which the British needed to escape, to regain their sovereignty and re-establish their country as an independent, free-trading nation again, open to all the world, and renewing its links with English speaking nations in North America and the Commonwealth. Britain outside the EU would not be without friends and allies it was argued because of the existence of the Anglosphere, countries with close cultural, historical, security, economic and political ties to Britain. Conservative Eurosceptics most attracted to the idea of the Anglosphere include Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Liam Fox and David Davis.

The Anglosphere is not a precise concept. Andrew Mycock and Ben Wellings argue that it denotess an Anglophonic community underpinned by a 'commitment to uphold a particular conception of liberty and the post-war rules-based international order;...a civilisational heritage founded on the values, beliefs and practices of free-market economics and liberal democracy; ...and mutual commemoration of past and present military conflicts.'⁵ As such it has a very different character and appeal from older ideas of Empire and imperial union.⁶ One of the difficulties is deciding which countries belong to it. The criteria for membership can be tightly or loosely drawn. Language, culture, values, and interests are all involved, as well as Anglo-Saxonism.⁷ The earlier tradition of Greater Britain suggests that the United States is an integral part of the Anglosphere, and some American neo-conservatives agree. In the post cold war era they wanted the United State to recognise its special ties with other English-speaking nations, organising them more formally as a coalition of the willing in support of US global leadership. The core members of this Anglosphere are the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Apart from shared language and political, legal and cultural heritage the relationship between these five countries does have an institutional basis through the security policy networks of which Five Eyes, the cooperation between the five intelligence services, has become most well-known. But there are many others, over thirty according to some estimates,⁸ covering law and cyber crime, immigration, borders and asylum and counter-terrorism and radicalisation, in addition to close military ties.

The hopes of many supporters of this conception of the Anglosphere is that other links, particularly economic and political links can be added to these security links, creating greater unity among the core English speaking nations. But this has always proved difficult, in part because of the geographical distance between the countries of the Anglosphere, and in part because of the size and exceptionalism of the United States which means that it dominates any grouping of which it is a member. A second and more recent conception of the Anglosphere which has gained in popularity is CANZUK. It leaves out the United States, consisting simply of the UK and its three most important former settler colonies, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Supporters of CANZUK believe it has the potential to become an association

bound together by trade, migration and security ties.⁹ This would require formal treaties between the four members, but there is little appetite for signing treaties which would extend co-operation much beyond the existing security networks. The interests of the five countries have become too diverse since the days when they were bound together by imperial preference.

A third much more expansive notion presents the Anglosphere as a series of concentric rings. There is an inner core – the US and CANZUK – but then a series of outer rings, which include countries with strong former connections to the UK and the British Empire such as Ireland, India, South Africa, Singapore, Nigeria and Malaysia but also countries like Japan and South Korea which have particularly strong ties to the US and share a commitment to a liberal rules-based international order. In this conception the Anglosphere becomes a network commonwealth of countries which enjoy high trust and economically dynamic civil societies and which co-operate with one another in different ways in pursuit of shared values and against other ‘civilisations’.¹⁰ It is the broadest conception of the Anglosphere but also the one most difficult to see being realised in institutional forms.

These different images of the Anglosphere have haunted the Brexit debate in the UK and the negotiations with the EU over a withdrawal agreement and a free trade agreement. Most Brexiters have been insistent that they do not want an isolationist Britain but an open, Global Britain which can assert its undivided and untrammelled sovereignty to negotiate its own trade and security deals and regulate its own economy in whatever way it chooses. Models of the future trading relationship with the EU have been drawn from the Anglosphere. The May Government began by seeking what it called a Canada plus deal but when it became apparent that this was not on offer, the options were posed as a Canada-style deal (broadly similar to the fta which Canada had negotiated with the EU) or an Australia-style deal (which was a euphemism for not being able to agree a deal and trading instead on WTO terms). ‘Canada’ meant a barebones free trade agreement which left out most services which comprised over 80 per cent of the British economy. In November 2020 the OBR forecast that a Canada option would result in a 4 per cent drop in GDP compared to staying in the EU and an Australia option a further 2 per cent drop.¹¹ Describing these options in this way reflected a desire by Brexiters to position Britain as an independent country like Canada and Australia. But Canada and Australia are far less integrated into trade and investment with the EU than is Britain. This is why Andrew Bailey, the Governor of the Bank of England, recently argued that the economic effect of Brexit would be more severe than COVID-19.¹² The freedom of an independent Global Britain to negotiate its own trade deals looks unlikely to compensate for the loss of access and the level of friction with the UK’s most important regional economic partner. There may be opportunities to increase trade with Anglosphere countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, but the share of UK exports going to these countries is tiny, less than 3 per cent. John Ravenhill and Jefferson Huebner calculate that the UK share in exports to Anglosphere economies declined from 36 per cent in 1949 to 2.5 per cent in 2017. The significance of intra Anglosphere trade has declined from approximately two thirds of these countries total trade in 1913 and 1947 to one third in 2017.¹³

The supporters of an Anglosphere strategy are not dismayed by this. The UK’s Brexit negotiator, David Frost, argued in a lecture in Brussels in 2020¹⁴ that for Brexiters like himself sovereignty was the key consideration. Short-term losses created by Brexit were not important. What mattered was that Britain should regain control over its borders, its laws and its money. Britain as an independent country once more could decide the most appropriate regulatory regime for its existing sectors and crucially for new sectors, such as AI and biotechnology. It would be free to set its own rules. This would allow Britain to seize opportunities for trade and cooperation all around the globe and would not tie it to Europe.

Advocates of Global Britain like David Frost want disengagement with Europe and re-engagement with the Anglosphere, as an alternative anchorage in an increasingly disorderly world. In some moods they seem to want as little to do with Europe as possible, unwinding the degree of integration and co-operation which has grown up in the last four decades. Some of them even see it as a second Reformation, or even more inaccurately a second Glorious Revolution,¹⁵ the severing of ties with Europe and the building of a new global presence for the UK in the world, even if that means for example sacrificing the British car industry and other European supply chains. It is easy to see which ties the Brexiters want to jettison, harder to identify the new ties they will be able to forge. The Anglosphere should be the most fertile ground because of the historic ties which have long existed, but CANZUK will never be the equivalent of the EU, and the US shows no sign of wanting to confine itself to an association of English-speaking nations. There used to be talk of the UK leaving the EU and joining NAFTA (Henry Kissinger once floated the idea), but NAFTA has been replaced by Trump's USMCA and that is no longer an option. The Biden Administration is unlikely to plan an early revival of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the US and the EU which Trump scuppered. Britain's participation in any case would be difficult now that it has left the EU. A separate British-US trade deal is possible but will not be a priority and would in any case involve big intrusions into UK sovereignty which Brexiters are supposed not to like. What is more probable is a willingness of the US under Biden to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which Trump pulled out of. There has been speculation that Britain might try to participate, but some of the other nations involved might not welcome that. It is a long time since the UK had a significant presence in the Pacific.

It is hard to identify any options for alliances and free trade agreements in the post-Brexit era which can fill the gap made by the end of the close and privileged position Britain has held as a member of the EU for the last forty six years. Britain cannot simply jump from the European circle into an Anglosphere circle. The world has fundamentally changed. The Trump presidency demonstrated how much the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that was a feature of US policy for more than six decades has collapsed. The Biden presidency will seek to revive a traditional form of US global leadership and a measure of bipartisanship, but no-one now can be sure that the new policy will survive the next time the Presidency changes hands. The polarisation and deadlock within US politics has weakened the position of the US in the world and its ability to maintain the alliances it needs for its long-term leadership.

The Anglosphere remains an alluring idea for many Brexiters. They feel much more comfortable with Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders than they do with fellow Europeans. They think of the former as their true friends. The British political class as a whole has long had a bias towards the United States and the Anglosphere rather than to Europe, finding its models both of leadership and of policy more often there than in other European states. Persistent ideas that Britain had a special relationship with the United States or that Britain's role was to be a bridge between the United States and Europe have been strong in the post-war period, but they will be hard to continue into the Brexit era. Until Donald Trump all US presidents saw advantages to the US in Britain being a full member of the European Community. With Brexit a reality any idea of the UK being a bridge between Europe and America has disappeared, and the value to the US of having a special relationship with the UK has diminished because Britain outside the EU will be a less significant player.

Post-Brexit Britain is in danger of losing its footing in all three circles which for Churchill guaranteed Britain's status as a great power. The attraction of the Anglosphere is that it suggests there may be a way of maintaining a global role and significant alliances by merging two of Churchill's three

circles, the English speaking world, and the Commonwealth and Empire, and abandoning the third, United Europe. But none of these circles are what they were in 1946. It is telling that Government Ministers as opposed to Conservative intellectuals and commentators speak often about Global Britain but much more rarely about the Anglosphere. As Martin Donnelly, former Permanent Secretary at the Department of Trade, has put it, British policy seemed to be intent on 'giving up a three course meal, which is the depth and intensity of our trade relationships across the European Union and partners now, for the promise of a packet of crisps in the future'.¹⁶

¹ W. Churchill, 'Speech, Llandudno 9 October 1948', reprinted in R. Churchill (ed.) *Europe Unite – Speeches: 1947 and 1948 by Winston S. Churchill*, London, Cassell 1950, pp. 417-18.

² A. Gamble, *Between Europe and America: the future of British politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan 2003.

³ N. Stephenson, *The Diamond Age*, New York, Bantam Books 1995. See S. Vucetic, 'The Anglosphere beyond security' in B. Wellings & A. Mycock (eds) *The Anglosphere: Continuity, Dissonance and Location*, British Academy, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 78.

⁴ D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the future of world order 1860-1900*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007; M. Kenny & N. Pearce, *Shadows of Empire: the Anglosphere in British Politics*, Cambridge, Polity 2018.

⁵ A. Mycock & B. Wellings, 'Continuity, Dissonance and Location: An Anglosphere research agenda', in Wellings & Mycock (eds) *The Anglosphere*, p.1.

⁶ Kenny & Pearce, *Shadows of Empire*, p. 161.

⁷ Vucetic, 'The Anglosphere beyond security'; Kenny & Pearce, *Shadows of Empire*.

⁸ T. Legrand, 'The past, present and future of Anglosphere security networks: Constitutive reduction of a shared identity', in Wellings & Mycock, *The Anglosphere*, pp. 56-76.

⁹ Kenny & Pearce, *Shadows of Empire*, p. 163.

¹⁰ J. Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-speaking Nations will lead the way in the twenty-first century*, Lanham M.D., Rowman & Littlefield 2004.

¹¹ <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-gaping-brexite-hole-in-the-chancellors-budget-statement/> (Accessed 10 December 2020).

¹² <https://www.cityam.com/boe-governor-andrew-bailey-no-deal-brexite-worse-for-economy-than-covid/> (Accessed 10 December 2020).

¹³ J. Ravenhill & J. Huebner, 'The political economy of the Anglosphere: Geography trumps History', in Wellings & Mycock, *The Anglosphere*, p. 99.

¹⁴ <https://no10media.blog.gov.uk/2020/02/17/david-frost-lecture-reflections-on-the-revolutions-in-europe/> (Accessed 10 December 2020).

¹⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/12/09/choppers-politics-boris-johnson-can-today-seize-place-history/> (Accessed 10 December 2020).

¹⁶ Cited in B. Wellings, *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 2019, p. 165.