



Ethnic minority MPs, Conservative Party modernisation, and post-Brexit narratives of Global Britain

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Agnès Alexandre-Collier**

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Abstract

Since 2016, the 'rhetoric of 'Global Britain' has assumed a central position in Conservative Party attempts to articulate a post-Brexit vision. This article identifies and examines four key narratives of Global Britain – *cultural, affective, functionalist, and idealised* – spotlighting the interventions of ethnic minority MPs (excluding white minorities). It does so as a notable and hitherto largely overlooked legacy of the Conservative modernisation agenda pursued by David Cameron (2005–2016) was the diversified composition of the parliamentary party, which significantly enhanced the descriptive representation of ethnic minorities. Although these ethnic minority MPs were showcased as symbols of Conservative modernisation, their presence did not serve to reinforce modernisation in ideological terms (i.e. in a liberal direction). Instead, ethnic minority MPs played an important role in projecting a set of Conservative political and cultural values through the rhetoric of Global Britain, helping shape the parameters of contemporary British conservatism.

Keywords

Conservative Party, ethnic minority representation, Global Britain, Kemi Badenoch, modernisation

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Introduction

Since 2016, the rhetoric of 'Global Britain' has assumed a central position in Conservative attempts – both in government and among MPs – to articulate a vision for the post-Brexit United Kingdom. The idea of 'Global Britain', which has taken hold since Brexit, is arguably less oriented towards the countries involved but more about the notion of a nation

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liberated from EU constraints and reverting to an older conception of UK foreign policy and of Britain itself (Vucetic, 2021: 218). With the expression ‘Global Britain’ largely supplanting the idea of the Anglosphere in Conservative narratives between 2017 and 2022 (Bell and Vucetic, 2019; Vucetic, 2021) the assumption that Global Britain offers an alternative geopolitical orientation for the United Kingdom beyond the European Union, became well established in the mainstream of British politics. Implicit within it is the assumption that former British colonies continue to have enduring linkages with the United Kingdom (Bonotti et al., 2025). This change of rhetoric has coincided with a remarkable transformation of the Conservative Party’s image and organisation. Diversity has indeed been one of the most visible effects of a process which was triggered by former PM David Cameron’s strategy to ‘detoxify’ the Conservative brand and make it more representative of society at large. Post-Brexit, Conservative Cabinets have thus included an increasing number of ethnic minority members, a process which culminated in the election of a Prime Minister of Indian origins, Rishi Sunak in 2022, followed by Kemi Badenoch, 2024, a female leader of Nigerian origins, both countries being part of the geographical area supposedly encompassed by ‘Global Britain’.

With ethnic minority MPs becoming a pivotal component of the party’s evolution, this article aims to assess the prominence of ‘Global Britain’ among MPs who may be perceived as standard-bearers of this new geopolitical outlook. It argues that while Conservative ethnic minority MPs tend to prioritise the values of the party over the representation of communities from whom they originate, a focus on ‘Global Britain’ could help them bridge the gap between substantive and descriptive representation. As such, it offers itself as a particular and valuable orientation for this group of MPs, despite the limited purchase polling suggests that the idea has among the electorate more widely (Denham et al., 2025).

For our purpose, we collected all the parliamentary speeches produced by ethnic minority Conservative MPs between 2017 and 2022 with explicit references to Global Britain. We then examine four key narratives of Global Britain which have emerged over the past decade and which we demarcate as cultural, affective, functionalist, and idealised. We understand them as strategic narratives, defined by Miskimmon et al. (2013: 2) as ‘a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors’. Furthermore, we seek to locate these in relation to the evolving character of contemporary British conservatism. Our focus on ethnic minority MPs (excluding white minorities)¹ is justified by three reasons. First, they have been showcased as symbols of Conservative modernisation, given the emphasis placed on diversifying the public face of the party by David Cameron and his successors (Critch et al., 2024). Second, they have played an important part in reshaping Conservative politics in recent times (Saini et al., 2023), for example as prominent Eurosceptic voices in favour of Brexit, disproportionately so relative to the PCP as a whole (Alexandre-Collier, 2021: 391). This has translated into some prominent ethnic minority figures supporting Brexit during the 2016 EU referendum on the grounds the EU principle of free movement favoured a type of immigration which discriminated against the Commonwealth (Saunders, 2020). Third, they might be assumed to have greater connections than others in the PCP to some of the parts of the world in which the United Kingdom was particularly interested post-Brexit as part of its Global Britain strategy, especially Commonwealth countries. A central question for this article is therefore whether we see ethnic minority MPs embrace the notion of Global Britain as a way to represent the descriptive groups to which they belong, or to promote

Conservative values which would point to a specific ideological orientation. Both hypotheses will be examined as they target different objectives: on the one hand, descriptive representation from MPs of, for example, Indian, Nigerian or Ghanaian origins can be preconceived as a strategy for deflecting accusations of racism and colonialism, while substantive representation through the mention of Singapore and thriving Asian economies appears as a means of alluding to ‘Singapore-upon-Thames’ as the neo-liberal epitome of Global Britain’s economic vision.

This analysis serves to highlight a notable and hitherto largely overlooked legacy of the modernisation agenda pursued during the party leadership tenure of David Cameron (2005–2016). At the heart of Cameron’s programme of Conservative modernisation was the assumption that in order to return to power the party had to better reflect the values and aspirations of 21st-century British society. This combined an ideological shift in a more socially liberal direction with an attempt to make the party more representative of modern Britain through the selection and promotion of more female and ethnic minority parliamentary candidates. While the depth and durability of David Cameron’s project of Conservative Party modernisation has been rightly questioned (Kerr and Hayton, 2015), one lasting effect was to change the composition of the PCP, which, with the number of ethnic minority MPs on the Conservative benches increasing from 11 in 2010 to 23 MPs in 2019, became the most diverse it has ever been. As the article shows, the growing number of ethnic minority Conservative MPs, who have been notably represented by the rise of the previous and current leaders of the party, Rishi Sunak and Kemi Badenoch, influenced the debate about ‘Global Britain’ in the Conservative Party, which we explore more deeply as *cultural*, *affective*, *functionalist*, and *idealised* narratives.

By focusing on this group, particularly the reference to ‘Global Britain’ as a catch-all phrase which manages to capture and interrelate these MPs’ personal identities with the party’s post-Brexit vision outside the EU, our aim will also be to assess the continuous credibility of Cameron’s modernisation agenda. We thus argue that contra the prevailing assumption that modernisation did not endure, narratives about Global Britain preserved this legacy in an unexpected way, contributing to the shifting nature of Euroscepticism from an Anglo-centric white phenomenon to a vision of Britain in the world outside the EU drawing on the Anglosphere, Commonwealth and legacy of empire.

The article proceeds as follows. First, in order to trace the genealogy of ‘Global Britain’, it is necessary to return to the emergence of the Anglosphere idea in Conservative politics and its relationship with Euroscepticism, which Cameronite modernisation sought to accommodate itself to. Second, it explores the four narratives of Global Britain noted above. The article concludes by highlighting the lack of cohesiveness in Conservative discourse of ‘Global Britain’ and the ethnic minority MPs’ preference for the substantive representation of Conservative ideological values.

Theory and methods

Conservative modernisation, the Anglosphere and Euroscepticism

In the aftermath of landslide electoral defeat in 1997, the debate about the future of the Conservative Party was soon characterised as a cleavage between modernisers and traditionalists (Bale, 2010; Hayton, 2012). The latter advocated Thatcherism and social authoritarianism, while the former regarded themselves as comfortable with change and were more liberal in outlook. Following a third consecutive general election defeat in

2005, the modernisers came into the ascendancy through the election of David Cameron as party leader. At the heart of Cameron's programme of Conservative modernisation was the assumption that in order to return to power, the party had to better reflect the values and aspirations of 21st-century British society. This combined an ideological shift in a more socially liberal direction, and an attempt to make the party more representative of modern Britain through the selection and promotion of more female and ethnic minority parliamentary candidates. Analysis of Cameron's rhetoric on Britishness suggests that it was 'inclusive and outward facing' (Atkins, 2016: 618), which is indicative of his liberal stance and desire to distance the party from the legacy of Powellite ethno-nationalism.

Cameronite modernisation did not, however, involve confronting Euroscepticism. Although the issue was downplayed, this ultimately served to suppress rather than address the issue (Lynch, 2015). The trend of hardening Euroscepticism in British conservatism had commenced in the late-1980s, under the influence of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It gained momentum following the debate over European integration prompted by the Maastricht Treaty in the early-1990s and continued unabated throughout the Cameron tenure, even if the party leadership itself was largely not drawn from the hard Eurosceptic wing. On their return to power (in coalition with the Liberal Democrats) in 2010 the Conservatives had a manifesto commitment to an immigration target that was incompatible with EU membership, particularly in the context of Eurozone crisis from 2011 and the Syrian refugee crisis of 2013 onwards. These issues fuelled hardening Euroscepticism (Thompson, 2017) and growing support for UKIP. In addition to the set of austerity measures which the new Cameron government was ready to introduce as a response to the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, the EU was more than ever the perfect scapegoat for British difficulties.

The persistence and strengthening of hard Euroscepticism in the PCP (to the extent that by the time of the referendum in 2016, more than 4 in 10 Conservative MPs publicly backed Vote Leave) is an important part of the explanation of the rise of the Anglosphere idea in British politics and the role of the Conservative Party in promoting it. In the decade or so prior to Brexit, Eurosceptics on the right had fostered the Anglosphere as an alternative to European integration which drew on an assortment of cultural, economic, and political ties with deep historical roots (Kenny and Pearce, 2018; Wellings and Baxendale, 2015). The Conservative reaction to the external shock of the vote to depart the EU (a decision which went against the wishes of most of the party leadership) was a process of party change driven by a factional takeover by the hard Eurosceptics, transforming the Conservatives unambiguously into the party of Brexit (Hayton, 2022). This ascendancy of the hard Eurosceptics brought a desire not just to leave the political structures of the EU but to disengage with the bloc as much as possible, in favour of re-engagement with the Anglosphere (Gamble, 2021). The allure of the Anglosphere permeated the debate about what future relationship with the EU the United Kingdom should pursue, as the relative merits of 'Canada plus', 'Canada-style' trade arrangements or an 'Australia-style' immigration points system were weighed by the Eurosceptics in the aftermath of the referendum (Gamble, 2021: 110).

On the other hand, this re-embrace of the Anglosphere potentially posed difficulties for the Conservatives that were not easily dismissed, in that it did not readily sit with the modernised, liberal conservatism advanced in the party in the 21st century, particularly under the leadership of David Cameron. This might of course simply be taken as further evidence of the comprehensive defeat of the liberal conservatism Cameron championed in the face of populist and radical right pressures, epitomised by the vote for Brexit itself.

While there is truth to this, and certainly the Anglosphere idea has been closely associated with the Eurosceptic right of the party, it is also the case that the Eurosceptic right of the party has itself evolved significantly since the 1990s from its Powellite origins (in contrast to the Brexiteers, Powell was sceptical about the special relationship with the United States, and an ardent Ulster Unionist). While critics have pointed to the undercurrent of racialised Powellite nostalgia in the Vote Leave campaign, it is also true that the official Brexit campaign (led by Conservatives) sought to cultivate a post-racial appearance and internationalist outlook, distancing itself from ethno-nationalism (Melhuish, 2024: 479). By the time of the referendum, some of the leading Eurosceptic figures on the right of the Conservative Party were minority ethnic MPs, for example Kwasi Kwarteng and Priti Patel, who with three other parliamentary colleagues co-authored the controversial tract *Britannia Unchained*, before becoming senior Tory figures (Kwarteng et al., 2012). As such, Cameron's efforts to diversify the PCP, which was a key facet of his modernisation agenda, did not necessarily serve to reinforce the tilt in a more socially liberal direction which was the central thrust of modernisation in ideological terms.

Although a somewhat fluid and ambiguous concept, the 'core' membership of the Anglosphere is readily identifiable. Five countries – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom – are widely recognised as the hub of the Anglosphere. Beyond this, it has an 'inherently flexible, ambiguous and often elusive reach in geographical terms, and that is part of its political appeal' (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 2). The fundamental historical basis of the Anglosphere is therefore settler colonialism. Vucetic (2011) has persuasively argued that the origins of the Anglosphere are racial and that the relations between these states continues to be underpinned by a racialised Anglo-Saxon identity. This critical appraisal is shared by Alexander Davis (2019: 5), who asserts that attempts by its proponents to advance the notion of the Anglosphere 'reveal the persistence of the colonial hierarchy within the idea of English-speaking unity'. His analysis of the complex relationship between the core (or Western) Anglosphere and a postcolonial state, India, that is sometimes included in or associated with the Anglosphere and at other times excluded, illustrates the extent to which it remains a racialised identity. He argues that even when India is included in a broader conception of the Anglosphere, this is a 'pluralist-yet hierarchical' one that relegates India below the core constituents and which 'particularly privileges educated, English-speaking and wealthy Indians' (Davis, 2019: 29). As Andrew Mycock and Ben Wellings (2019: 3) have similarly noted, 'the historical racial typographies of the nineteenth century and twentieth century continue – if now implicitly – to influence the popular and political boundaries of inclusion and exclusion' in the Anglosphere. Any association with a white Anglo-Saxon identity, exclusionary on grounds of race, would be redolent of the legacy of Powellism and run directly counter to the Conservative Party's 'modernised' image and professed 21st century ethos. The terminology of Global Britain was thus favoured by the party over that of the Anglosphere, passing over the linkages between the two.

While the depth and durability of David Cameron's project of Conservative Party modernisation has been rightly questioned, one lasting effect of it was to change the composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party, through the selection of more female and ethnic minority candidates. Under and following Cameron's tenure the public face of the party has altered significantly, with a notable number of ethnic minority MPs being appointed to ministerial roles and the Cabinet. The extent of this change was illustrated by the selection by Conservative MPs in 2022 of Rishi Sunak as their new leader, who became Britain's first non-white Prime Minister. The symbolic importance of this has

been noted by Sunak himself, who declared himself to be a ‘proud Hindu’ and ‘hugely proud of my Indian roots’ (UK in India, 2023) and argued that his position illustrated the extent to which Britain, and the Conservative Party, has changed. At the 2023 party conference, for example, he argued that the United Kingdom is ‘the most successful multi-ethnic democracy on earth’ and the Conservative Party ‘has led the way on that’ (Sunak, 2023). For one Conservative commentator, Sunak’s ascent to the premiership is ‘a credit to what is sometimes called the Anglosphere’ (Moore, 2022). By contrast, Saini et al. (2023: 55) argue that Sunak and other high-profile ethnic minority Conservatives act as ‘ethnic minority post-racial gatekeepers, continuing yet intensifying a long trend within the Conservative Party of the reproduction of the racial status quo legitimised through nominal ethnic minority representation’. While the role of ethnic minority MPs was essential for the party leadership to endorse and legitimise a pro-Brexit anti-immigration ideological shift cleared of possible accusations of racism (Alexandre-Collier 2021), the actual involvement of ethnic minority MPs in articulating and shaping narratives of Global Britain is something we explore further in this article.

The place of ‘Global Britain’ in Conservative discourses

Since 2016, direct references to the Anglosphere by Conservative parliamentarians have been very limited.² The avoidance of the term perhaps suggests that even among those sympathetic to it, the fear that it has negative racial and imperialistic connotations was a barrier to commonplace usage. The reference to Global Britain by the party leadership was therefore used as a convenient substitute which could then serve different purposes: using it as synonymous with a Churchillian interest in the ‘wider world’ in an attempt to remain geographically vague and not to antagonise historic partners; and reaching beyond ‘white’ and ‘racialised’ conceptions as opposed to the Anglosphere or the ‘Commonwealth’ which is loaded with postcolonial ‘Empire 2.0’ innuendos (Bell and Vucetic, 2019; Turner, 2019a).

Global Britain also corresponded with the immediate post-Brexit context when there was a sense of urgency to justify the benefits of Brexit and devise the United Kingdom’s place in the world, as the nation was afflicted with post-Brexit status anxiety regarding its international standing (Bonotti et al., 2025). This was precisely the sequence when the ‘prêt-à-porter’ idea of the Anglosphere conveniently morphed into Global Britain. It was indeed the title of a full section in the 2017 Conservative Manifesto, which outlined Global Britain as follows, emphasising the importance of ‘old friends and allies’ beyond the EU:

Alongside our proposed deep and special partnership with the European Union, we will maintain the historical, cultural and economic ties that link us to our old friends and allies around the globe. We will build upon our existing special relationship with the United States, and forge new economic and security partnerships that make us more prosperous at home and more secure abroad. We will strengthen our close links with our Commonwealth allies, continuing our mission together to promote democratic values around the world and build on our existing economic relationships to further our common trading interests. We will develop alliances and co-operate more with old friends and new partners (Conservative Party, 2017: 37–41).

The 2019 Conservative Manifesto omitted the terms Anglosphere and Global Britain but identified specific countries with which the United Kingdom was expected to forge

different kinds of partnerships. It aspired to have ‘80 per cent of UK trade covered by free trade agreements within the next three years, starting with the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan’, and also promised to ‘forge stronger links with the Commonwealth, which boasts some of the world’s most dynamic economies such as India, with which we already share deep historical and cultural connections’ (Conservative Party, 2019: 57). This is crucial to the idea of Global Britain, which sees such ties as more meaningful than those with EU countries. It also hoped to exploit these affective relationships by engaging ‘diaspora communities in the UK’ with efforts to leverage export finance to increase penetration of emerging markets. The 2021 Integrated Review, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, outlined an ambitious international role for the UK post-Brexit, to which the ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’ was central (UK Government, 2021). Developments such as AUKUS and the application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) provided some credence to this reorientation and to the rhetoric of Global Britain that was favoured by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss. Truss replaced Johnson as Prime Minister in September 2022, but after her short-lived premiership, the language of Global Britain was dropped under Rishi Sunak, and did not feature in the *Integrated Review Refresh* published in 2023 (UK Government, 2023).

As mentioned previously, in this article we aim to explore the contribution of ethnic minority Conservative MPs to narratives of post-Brexit Britain and the *idea* of Global Britain within them. But any study of parliamentary discourse is framed within a wider discussion about political representation. In this field, academic literature usually makes a distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, a distinction which is particularly relevant in our case study applied to ethnic minority MPs. ‘Descriptive representation refers to the presence of certain types of people in given places or institutions’ while ‘substantive representation refers to the representation of the political interests, broadly defined, of different groups of society’ (Allen, 2018: 7). Since Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) seminal work on representation, academic literature has been more clearly focused on the need to promote diversity in terms of gender and race to ensure fair representation (among the most recent works on race, see English, 2022; Sobolewska et al., 2018) which then became a core issue of Cameron’s Conservative modernisation agenda. Following Theresa May’s suggestion that the Conservatives were widely regarded as ‘the nasty party’ (May, 2002), the need for more female and ethnic minority MPs was considered to be the best strategy to ‘detoxify’ the Conservative brand (Alexandre-Collier, 2021). Descriptive representation would amount to ethnic minority MPs appearing as standard-bearers of their descriptive groups, while substantive representation could be associated with adhering to values and ideas which are shared by their party, or factions within it. As previous research has found, the selection of ethnic minority Conservative candidates in pro-Brexit and anti-immigration constituencies favoured the rise of Conservative MPs who prioritised Conservative ideas and values ahead of representing the ethnic groups they belonged to (Alexandre-Collier, 2021).

For this survey, we collected all the parliamentary speeches produced by Conservative Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) MPs between 2017 and 2022, in the context of the post-referendum negotiations and we qualitatively isolated all the references to the place of Britain outside the EU and its future place in the world. To identify BAME Conservative MPs, we compiled several sources, namely the survey published by the House of Commons Library about diversity in politics which provides the list of BAME MPs elected in 2019 which we complemented with sources from newspaper articles about

the 2017 election. This first stage helped us produce a list of 24 BAME Conservative MPs elected between 2017 and 2022. We then used the Hansard database to correlate each of these MPs with references to ‘Global Britain’ and/or ‘Brexit’ made from 1 January 2017 to 1 January 2023. As shown in Appendix 1, this produced a disappointing list of only 63 speeches (out of 1395 references to Global Britain from all parties’ MPs). In trying to better grasp the idea of ‘Global Britain’ outside the UK, we then noticed that some of these speeches mentioned countries such as India, Nigeria, Ghana and East Asian countries which were associated with Global Britain and/or related to these MPs’ origins. We therefore focused on these countries to extend our search. We finally refined our analysis by looking at other official and party documents, such as the 2017 and 2019 Conservative manifestos and the 2021 Integrated Review and 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. In doing so, we noted the importance of Singapore and correlated each of the 24 BAME MPs with any of the countries or organisations related to Global Britain. These data led us to single out groups of similar arguments and therefore identify four key narratives of Global Britain which have emerged over the past decade and which we demarcate as cultural, affective, functionalist, and idealised.

National identities are constructed and reproduced through discourse, so narrative analysis is a useful tool to explore visions of a nation’s place in the world (Wodak, 2012). Previous scholarship has interrogated the strategic narratives about Europe contained within the speeches of Conservative Party leaders (Bonnet, 2025). As Bonnet (2025: 2) notes, narratives are used to frame situations, and to offer people ‘a sense of purpose and identity’, but ‘relatively little attention has been devoted to the actual evolution of the narrativization of the United Kingdom/Europe relationship in Tory discourse’ despite the historic importance of Brexit. While Bonnet’s astute study focuses on Conservative leaders and Europe, ours examines the post-Brexit articulations of Britain’s place in the world beyond the EU in the context of Conservative modernisation, through our focus on ethnic minority MPs.

The analysis of how political actors utilise narratives strategically is now an important part of international relations scholarship, and here we rely on the conceptual framework laid out by Miskimmon et al. (2013). In that seminal work, they differentiate between three narrative types: system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. System narratives relate to the structure of the global order, so are not directly relevant to our study. Rather we delineate three identity narratives, which ‘set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has’ (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 8) – two of which ethnic minority Conservative parliamentarians played an important part in constructing, and a third which is present in wider Conservative discourse but which they are not active participants in promulgating. We also identify a fourth narrative, which we classify as an issue/policy narrative.

The **first** narrative includes MPs who wish to reinforce the historical and *cultural* links with countries which were at the core of Britain’s imperial past. In this major narrative, the connection with India plays a dominant part although speeches do not necessarily derive from MPs of Indian origins. In the **second** major narrative, specific countries like Nigeria and Ghana are essentially invoked by Conservative MPs with links to these countries, directly or through their ancestors, in order to promote a more *affective* interpretation of Global Britain thus appealing to these communities who share the same origins. In the **third** narrative, which could be identified as *functionalist*, specific countries, including India and Ghana are mentioned primarily as commercial partners with which partnerships could be forged. Relationships are envisaged with cold pragmatism in terms of costs

versus benefits. Finally, in the **fourth** narrative, reference to major Asian economies like Singapore is part of a wider *idealised* Conservative interpretation of Global Britain which is embedded in a neo-liberal conception of Britain's economy, but this is not a narrative ethnic minority MPs play a key part in articulating through their parliamentary interventions. Only the functionalist narrative could be classified as a 'policy narrative' which 'set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished' (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 8) while the other three are classified as identity narratives. In line with Vucetic's presentation of 'Global Britain' and 'Little Britain' as the two sides of the same coin (Vucetic, 2021: 217–223), this leads us to argue that the overall purpose of 'Global Britain' is less to articulate a comprehensive understanding of the world order (i.e. a 'system narrative') than to project a set of cultural and political values (Miskimmon et al., 2013), that is an ideologically infused identity. Our analysis demonstrates not only how ethnic minority parliamentarians have influenced the ideological debate about the nature of Global Britain, but also sheds light on their own conceptions of their representative role at Westminster.

Methodologically, we adopt and utilise Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA), which brings together the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014). CDA is an interpretivist approach which involves an inductive analysis of the corpus from which emergent narratives are derived (Bonnet, 2024: 1253). Given the importance of strategic narratives to national identities and to communicating and making sense of the situation of a state in the global order, CNA is a particularly appropriate tool (Bonnet, 2025). As Souto-Manning (2014: 163) notes, CNA 'allows for the critical analysis of narratives in the lifeworld – the everyday stories people tell – within the context of institutional discourses' (Souto-Manning, 2014: 163).

Narratives of Global Britain

Global Britain as a cultural narrative

The first narrative relies on the cultural and long-term connections between the United Kingdom and former countries with which they shared the same history. Consequently, the Commonwealth has been regularly invoked as a natural territory for a renewed relationship, although the reference to this organisation has come to be criticised as a hidden return to a version of history which venerates the country's imperial past. But with the accusation of an 'Empire 2.0' mindset (Turner, 2019a), it is no surprise that this reference has been generally understated in Conservative rhetoric. When used by ethnic minority MPs, no mention is thus made of their personal connection with Commonwealth countries. Suella Braverman resorted to an Anglo-centric assessment of what appears to be an imbalanced relationship between a dominant UK and other countries which are perceived as looking up to this world leader:

We have to talk up the opportunities. We are the sixth-largest economy in the world. We have the world's language. We are leaders of the Commonwealth. We have a legal system emulated around the world, a parliamentary system envied by other countries, and financial services that are unrivalled. Britain will succeed after Brexit, and we have to find ways in which we can deliver Brexit, not reasons why we cannot (*Hansard* HC Deb., 20 December 2017).

For Shailesh Vara, who was born to Indian parents and was MP for North West Cambridgeshire from 2005 until 2024, the notion of a British-Indian diaspora can be

expected to strike a chord with the community he extols here: ‘The United Kingdom already has close links with India, not least because of the valuable contribution made by the 1.6 million who make up the British-Indian diaspora. What discussions did my right hon. Friend have at the G7 with Prime Minister Modi of India about strengthening those ties post Brexit?’ (*Hansard* HC Deb., 3 September 2019). Adam Afriyie, whose father was from Ghana, is keen to mention this country as another key player of Global Britain, based on cultural and similarities between both countries:

Ghanaians are completely open to us. They are English-speaking. They have the same language and the same common law legal system. They are anglophiles. Almost every Ghanaian President has been educated in and has strong connections with Britain. It was very clear from the incoming President’s inaugural speech that he fully intends to work with the United Kingdom on trade. Furthermore, we were pretty much the only country to have an audience with the President on his first day in office. That says a lot about the relationship and good will that we enjoy between our countries and it says a lot about the opportunities in Ghana and the certainty with which British companies can operate there (*Hansard* HC Deb., 25 January 2017).

However, in this cultural narrative, the United Kingdom is often presented in the dominant position of a model from which these countries should learn, confirming Davis’s (2019) concept of hierarchy between former colonies such as India and the Anglosphere. As we have seen, ethnic minority Conservative MPs often resort to the strategy of contrasting the United Kingdom with their native country as a way to express pride in their British identity, thus belittling the former, even unwillingly, as Adam Afriyie does here: ‘However, there is no doubt that Ghana – and the whole of west Africa – faces challenges, including opaque business practices; a lack of transparency in the tax and investment regimes; and sometimes a lack of consistency in the application of the law across the country’ (*Hansard* HC Deb. 25 January 2017).

Global Britain as an affective narrative

The second narrative taps more explicitly into the personal origins of ethnic minority MPs who vindicate an affective conception of Global Britain based on their family connections. Using one’s family experience is a double strategy to justify a partnership with the country concerned while appearing as representative of the diversity of British society, in line with the party’s modernisation agenda, and free from accusations of racism that could be sensed in the Anglosphere narrative. Adam Afriyie became the government’s trade envoy to Ghana in 2016, and a UK-Ghana trade partnership was agreed in 2021. Reflecting on his appointment, he noted: I was delighted because I feel I embody the relationship with Ghana. Having a father from Ghana and a mother from Britain, it is as though our relationship is embodied within my very soul’ (*Hansard* HC Deb., 25 January 2017). A similar affective narrative was expressed by Helen Grant MP, appointed as trade envoy to Nigeria in 2020. She noted, ‘Being the country of my father’s birth, Nigeria is very close to my heart, but it is also a nation of huge opportunity, rich in history and culture with vibrant and charismatic people’. On one official visit, Grant found ‘huge excitement about the opportunities that Brexit will bring, allowing our two nations to trade more closely. It was a glimpse of global Britain in action, spreading the rule of law, boosting prosperity, sharing our expertise and engaging fully with Commonwealth friends and international partners’. (*Hansard* HC Deb., 14 January 2019). The Conservatives thus

instrumentalised these personal connections to project an image of modernisation, based on the idea of ethnic minority MPs representing both their ethnic communities in the United Kingdom and countries with which they have a personal link, and which could be important international partners after Brexit.

This affective narrative is also based on the strategy of contrasting the United Kingdom and the country concerned as previously stated. Future party leader Kemi Badenoch (2017), having seemingly internalised post-imperial prejudice, used it extensively in her maiden speech to combine a rhetoric of cultural belittlement with emotional personal experience and memories:

I am often inexplicably confused with a member of the Labour party – I cannot think why. I am a Conservative. To all intents and purposes, I am a first-generation immigrant. I was born in Wimbledon, but I grew up in Nigeria. I chose to make the United Kingdom my home. Growing up in Nigeria I saw real poverty – I experienced it, including living without electricity and doing my homework by candlelight, because the state electricity board could not provide power, and fetching water in heavy, rusty buckets from a borehole a mile away, because the nationalised water company could not get water out of the taps. Unlike many colleagues born since 1980, I was unlucky enough to live under socialist policies. It is not something I would wish on anyone, and it is just one of the reasons why I am a Conservative. I believe that the state should provide social security, but it must also provide a means for people to lift themselves out of poverty.

The final effect is to praise the United Kingdom as a model and a saviour country: ‘Growing up in Nigeria, the view was rather different. The UK was a beacon, a shining light, a promise of a better life’ (Badenoch, 2017). Badenoch’s self-presentation twice appealed to both women and Black minorities: ‘As a woman of African origin’, ‘I believe that the vote for Brexit was the greatest ever vote of confidence in the project of the United Kingdom: that vision of a global Britain to which the Minister referred. It is a project that, as a young African girl, I dreamed about becoming part of. As a British woman, I now have the great honour of delivering that project for my constituents in the greatest Parliament on Earth’. Her maiden speech could be seen as an exemplar of the party’s agenda of modernisation which had showcased minorities in the party since 2010 to project an image of diversity and progress while promoting a neo-liberal and at times authoritarian agenda (Critch et al., 2024).

In that sense ethnic minority MPs’ affective mentions of Global Britain operated as a convenient way to combine descriptive (a community and a country) and substantive (Conservative values) representation:

As a woman of African origin, I also believe that there is a lot that Africa can teach us. Sound money is not just a catchy phrase. The lesson of Zimbabwe is salient for us today. Money cannot be printed and redistribution cannot be successful without first creating wealth.

Badenoch’s statement then goes back to classical conservatism:

Edmund Burke said that society is a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born. I say to colleagues who are wavering on tackling the debt and the deficit, ‘Hold your nerve’. This is part of that contract that we owe to our descendants.

Allegiance to Edmund Burke’s views allows Badenoch to acknowledge the party’s historical legacy before being entitled to move towards a more modern conception, thus

providing substance to her ideological stance and reclaiming credibility from her Conservative counterparts:

To leave our children carrying the burdens of our debt and excesses is morally wrong. I believe in free markets and free trade. But there is more to conservatism than economic liberalism – there is respect for the rule of law; personal responsibility; freedom of speech and of association; and opportunity through meritocracy. Those freedoms are being subtly eroded in an era when emotion and feeling are prized above reason and logic. It is those freedoms that I will seek to defend during my time in this House (*Hansard* HC Deb., 19 July 2017).

Global Britain as a functionalist narrative

In line with the Conservative neo-liberal post-Brexit agenda, Global Britain was seen as an endless territory of new commercial partnerships, with many countries representing export markets with growth potential. From the start, India was identified as a key partner, with the 2021 Integrated Review underlining the primary importance of the UK-India relationship:

The UK-India relationship is already strong, but over the next ten years we seek transformation in our cooperation across the full range of our shared interests. India – as the largest democracy in the world – is an international actor of growing importance. As Commonwealth nations, we have strong cultural links: 1.5 million British nationals are of Indian origin; and we enjoy broad collaboration across the education sector. Trade between the UK and India more than doubled between 2007 and 2019, our investment relationship supports over half a million jobs in each other's economies, and the UK is India's second-biggest research partner. The ability to strike our own trade deals will allow us to grow our economic relationship further, including through increased bilateral investment flows (UK Government, 2021: 62).

This narrative was taken over by pro-Brexit MPs of Indian origins who were however keen to dissociate their commercial interest in India from their own origins in order to avoid being seen as providing preferential treatment to these countries. For example, Essex MP Priti Patel argued: 'We will be a beacon for global free trade and pursue new trade and investment partnerships. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) has already mentioned new partnerships with India, and I hope that you will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that where Essex leads, the rest of the country will follow' (*Hansard* HC Deb., 22 March 2018). Or, as Suella Braverman argued: 'Britain stands to benefit from the fantastic opportunity to forge new trade deals with countries such as India and the USA' (*Hansard* HC Deb., 30 November 2016).

Compared with the number of British-Indian Conservative MPs, including the Prime Minister himself in the case of Rishi Sunak, these MPs turned out to be generally less vocal about a renewed partnership with India. The reservations and scepticism towards free movement prevented many MPs from fully endorsing a partnership that could amount to replacing one source of immigration with another. This argument, sometimes advanced by non-ethnic minority MPs, may have inhibited ethnic minority MPs in their desire to favour cooperation with Commonwealth countries, as shown by this quote from Edward Leigh: 'Apparently the Government are thinking of relaxing visa controls for India in order to get a free trade deal. While a free trade deal is valuable in itself, we should not be held to ransom. Does the Prime Minister agree that our new working-class voters who voted for Brexit did not vote to replace immigration from Europe with more immigration

from the rest of the world, any more than that when they were told that we would take back control, we would lose control of the channel?’ (*Hansard* HC Deb., 5 January 2022).

With the view that all these narratives are not mutually exclusive, other ethnic minority MPs also combined cultural and functional arguments to promote other Commonwealth countries, such as Adam Afriyie, already mentioned:

It strikes me that Ghana is a prime opportunity for the United Kingdom’s new outward-looking international profile, which looks to be integrated with the rest of the world as we begin to adapt our relationship with the European Union. Ghana should be right at the top of the list when it comes to looking at free trade arrangements. There is an open door there. The Ghanaian people are very comfortable with Britain: so comfortable that perhaps up to 500,000 of the Ghanaian diaspora are British citizens now. There is a depth of good will on which to draw between the two nations. I thank the Minister for agreeing to come to Ghana in the not-too-distant future for the 60th anniversary. I have two asks: please let us put Ghana and west African states at the top of the free trade agenda in negotiations, and let us welcome those nations as proper partners and allies in the fight against terror and in the pursuit of national security (*Hansard* HC Deb., 25 January 2017).

Global Britain as an idealised narrative

In 2012, a group of Conservative MPs published a pamphlet entitled *Britannia Unchained* which infused imperial nostalgia with the promotion of a neo-liberal political economy drawing inspiration from the Tiger economies of East Asia (Kwarteng et al., 2012). This was a key moment in the Conservatives’ turn towards Asia and away from the EU. Two of the authors, Priti Patel and Kwasi Kwarteng, had helped promote Cameron’s agenda of diversity and others like Liz Truss had been selected as parliamentary candidates through a process known as the priority candidates list, which prioritised the inclusion of women and ethnic minorities to make the party more socially representative (Bale, 2010: 271). Singapore and other economies like Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong became exemplars in the economic understanding of Global Britain as a neo-liberal, low tax and deregulated agenda for those MPs in the party who supported this view. In relation to the EU, Erkkilä et al. (2023) already observed that ‘the Singapore model was used in two inter-linking ways. First, as a threat to the EU with a highly regulated single market, and, second, as a desirable outcome for the United Kingdom in the event of a ‘no-deal’ outcome for Brexit’ (see also Martin, 2020). Although the expression of ‘Singapore-on-Thames’ only arose later in the media as a characterisation of remarks made by Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond to a German newspaper in early 2017, Singapore thus became the focal point of a double narrative, one that promoted a pragmatic agenda based on innovation and dynamism, another one that suggested an idealised scenario embedded in ideology in which Global Britain – through the symbol of Singapore – would be synonymous with an offshore deregulated tax haven. This idealised view of Singapore had a double appeal for some Thatcherite Conservatives, who admired not only its economic freedom but its social authoritarianism.

The pragmatist version of this narrative was already present in many parliamentary speeches which mentioned Singapore along with other countries, for example Julia Lopez MP in a debate on future international trade opportunities lauded bilateral agreements that exploit ‘close ties with countries like the United States, Australia and Singapore’ (HC, Vol. 659, col. 171WH, 1 May 2019). Here, as it often is, Singapore is grouped with countries readily identifiable with the Anglosphere. More significantly, this pragmatist

narrative of an economic and technological connection with Singapore than would go beyond a simple trade partnership can be found in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. In his foreword to that document, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak trumpets 'launching British International Investment's Singapore hub' as evidence to support his assertion that the United Kingdom has 'delivered the ambition we set for the Indo-Pacific tilt' (UK Government, 2023: 2). Yet Erkkilä et al. (2023) underlined the weaknesses of this economic model which relied on a misunderstanding of Singapore's economy, with critics questioning the United Kingdom's ability to succeed or pointing to the fundamental differences and incompatibility between the two countries (Sidaway and Bachmann, 2021: 69). Post-Brexit, the focus on Asian economic opportunities in particular proved however at odds with the reality of Britain's pivot towards this region, which Turner identified as partial and incomplete (Turner, 2019b).

On the other hand, the idealised version of 'Singapore-on-Thames' was often sold as a pro-Brexit argument and persistently hammered, after the 2016 referendum, like a mantra to provide an economic understanding of Global Britain. Yet it was strongly attached to ideology. Despite its mention by party senior figures like Hammond and Sunak, the model has not been adopted by ethnic minority MPs as a distinctive group, which indicates their reluctance to use it as a way to promote an idealised version of Global Britain which would signal factional realignment rather than substantive representation.

Conclusion

The vote for Brexit in 2016 marked a critical juncture with consequences that have reverberated throughout British politics. While questions have been rightly raised regarding the extent to which it triggered a coherent reorientation of Britain's international role (Oliver, 2023), it undoubtedly caused a reappraisal of how the United Kingdom's role in the world is articulated and understood by its leading political actors. For the Conservative Party, this revolved around the discourse of Global Britain which was adopted under the leadership of Theresa May in the aftermath of the vote and tailored primarily to an imagined audience of Brexiters (Atkins, 2022). This was utilised by her successors, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, before a shift towards a less expansive rhetoric under Rishi Sunak (Whitman, 2023). For some critics Global Britain was an empty signifier, an avatar of the 'island story' of Little England (Vucetic, 2021), as already argued. For others it represented an outmoded narrative of Empire (Turner, 2019a). While the initial adoption of the term was in some ways an act of political convenience in the aftermath of the referendum, it became the central moniker of attempts to articulate a Eurosceptic post-Brexit vision of Britain's future outside of the EU. Given the increasing dominance of the hard Eurosceptic perspective in Conservative Party politics post-2016, unsurprisingly this drew in significant part on the notion of the Anglosphere, which had garnered support on the Eurosceptic right in the years before the vote. However, as this article has demonstrated, the discourse of Global Britain has not been used to advance a singular or particularly cohesive perspective. Rather, through examining the interventions of ethnic minority Conservative MPs, various narratives of Global Britain can be identified, classified here in terms of *cultural*, *affective*, *functionalist*, and *idealised* narratives. As argued earlier, the overall purpose of 'Global Britain' is less to articulate an operational understanding of the world order ('system narrative') than to project a set of post-imperial cultural and political values that these MPs, in particular, have directly experienced and internalised. The analysis shows how these narratives emphasise cultural and historical ties with former colonies,

particularly India, Ghana, and Nigeria, showcasing the United Kingdom's global influence and potential for post-Brexit partnerships. While some MPs emphasise the United Kingdom's role as a model for other countries, others draw from personal experiences to advocate for stronger ties with particular countries. Ultimately, these narratives reflect the Conservative Party's efforts to project a modern, diverse image while pursuing a neo-liberal agenda.

This has highlighted the changing character of contemporary British conservatism and a somewhat overlooked aspect of the legacy of party modernisation, which the wider literature has, in large part, written off as an interlude in Conservative Party politics with only very limited long-term impact. Thus, through the use of the 'Global Britain' notion, ethnic minority politicians have contributed to an extended version of the Anglosphere which goes beyond its much-denied but well-embedded white connotations. As this article has explored, they have helped shape these discussions in ways that demonstrate a modernised perspective in the sense that a Powellite ethno-nationalist understanding of Britishness, which might have been expected to be a prominent part of the Conservative Eurosceptic right in times past, has been effectively marginalised. However, the contributions by minority ethnic MPs themselves show significant variation, and do not in many cases indicate active descriptive representation. For example, we have identified speeches made by ethnic minority MPs which tend towards criticising the country with which they have a personal link, or refer to it as a counter-model to what British identity and values represent for these MPs. Some ethnic minority MPs of Indian origins appear less keen than other Conservatives about renewing the UK-India relationship, in an attempt to eschew descriptive representation and avoid being seen as standard-bearers of the Indian community in the United Kingdom. Conversely, we have also found some examples of speeches which further connection with the country mentioned in an attempt to appeal to voters with similar origins or connections without standing simply as representatives of these communities or their perceived interests, which might be seen as descriptive representation. As such, the paper contributes to the growing literature on representation and the emphasis by MPs and parliamentary candidates on their personal traits (Trumm et al., 2025).

Yet it should be noted that Conservative ethnic minority MPs, as a distinctive group, may be expected not to make a difference in the coming years. Since the last election of 2024, their number has significantly declined. While Cameron's modernisation agenda had succeeded in increasing the percentage of ethnic minority MPs, with many of them appointed to high-profile Cabinet positions, they now only represent 12% of the parliamentary party (15 MPs out of 121 Conservative MPs) following the party's 2024 crushing electoral defeat. In spite of this, the leadership election to succeed Rishi Sunak continued to showcase ethnic minority talent within the party, featuring as it did three non-white candidates (Kemi Badenoch, James Cleverly, and Priti Patel). Badenoch eventually became the first black woman leader of a major political party in Britain. It is unlikely that the Conservative Party would have secured this first, or indeed provided the United Kingdom with its first non-white Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak), without the modernisation agenda that Cameron had championed.

While Badenoch's leadership of the Conservatives can be regarded as part of the legacy of modernisation under Cameron, that does not mean her politics conform to the Cameronite mould. Probably best known for her 'anti-woke' stance as Minister for Women and Equalities, her leadership likely marks a return to a more socially authoritarian Thatcherite conservatism that Cameron sought to define himself against. She has

rejected the idea of descriptive representation, arguing that terms such as the ‘black community’ should be ‘consigned to history’ (*The Times*, 2024). This is part of her wider rejection of what she labels ‘identity politics’, for example on transgender rights, and the social liberalism of Cameronite conservatism. Badenoch’s politics are thus part of a wider post-liberal turn towards a populist national conservatism, not based on ethno-nationalism but a defence of a Conservative interpretation of (in this case) British national identity (Hayton, 2025). Together with other Conservative ethnic minority MPs, she notably stands among the ‘most right-wing ideologues’ of the party (Saini et al., 2023) and has consequently played a notable role in the substantive representation of conservatism in recent years.

As ‘Global Britain’ is conceived as a set of ideas and values rather than a geopolitical vision, our study has shown that this group of MPs has not used this message significantly, but rather instrumentalised it to promote a more radical version of conservatism. Further research into the next generation of Conservative ethnic minority MPs would be needed, however, to determine whether this tendency was merely a temporary realignment favoured by the Brexit context, or whether it represents a more structural and lasting trend. Either way, this would provide clear evidence of the significant – albeit probably unintended – impact of Cameron’s modernisation agenda on the Conservative Party.

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Notes

1. Lists of ethnic minority MPs are regularly published by think tanks such as Black Vote and British Future and in official Hansard reports. See the list of all ethnic minority MPs elected in 2019 in Uberoi and Carthew (2023:13–14).
2. A search for the word in the Hansard database, between 2017 and 2022, shows only three mentions by Conservative MPs: Adam Afriyie (25 January 2017), Bob Seely (6 September 2018), and William Cash (15 January 2019).

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Appendix I

Table A1.

Name of BAME Conservative MP	Number of speeches referring to the expression 'Global Britain'
AFOLAMI Bim	2
AHMAD KHAN Imran	4
BADENOCH Kemi	5
BHATTI Saqib	3
BRAVERMAN Suella	1
CHISHTI Rehman	2
CLEVERLY James	5
COUTINHO Claire	2
GHANI Nus	2
GRANT Helen	1
JAVID Sajid	2
JAYAWARDENA Ranil	8
KWARTENG Kwasi	1
MOHINDRA Gagan	4
PATEL Priti	8
SCULLY Paul	5
SHARMA Alok	2
SUNAK Rishi	4
VARA Shailesh	2
Total	63