Brexit, nostalgia and the Great British fantasy

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We need to question the Brexiteers' view of history – their understanding of the past tells us how they view British democracy in the present, and what they want for the future.

Theresa May's visit to India. Picture by Stefan Rousseau PA Wire/PA Images. Press Association Images. All rights reserved. So Trump has affirmed the 'special relationship' between the US and Britain. Michael Gove assures us that this is an important step in securing a strong future for Brexit-Britain. Yet, the fact that Theresa May courted the new US president with a 1941 speech from Winston Churchill shows how much Brexiteer politics also draws heavily from a particular view of the past. From this perspective, an alliance between the US and Brexit-Britain seems obvious, even in the face of Trump's openly nationalist and protectionist rhetoric; it marks a return to the correct order of things as Britain becomes, once-again, part of a unique super-power alliance, not just one of many in a community of European nation-states.

Yet this view of Britain's past is fantasy, not history. Brexiteers are nostalgic for something that never existed: a time when Britain was both a wartime hero and a powerful global force. The reality, however, is that Britain's contribution to the allied war effort came at the price of its empire.

In the wake of the EU referendum, there has been a lot of talk about the prejudice and xenophobia of the Leave campaign. Little has been said, however, about its view of history.

From the phrase 'take back control' to UKIP's adoption of the Trump-esque 'make Britain great again', the call for Britain to leave the EU has been saturated with nostalgia. These slogans invoke a sense of our past so familiar that it seems to need no dates or references: they bring to mind the late-Victorian/Edwardian period, when most of the atlas was pink; they celebrate Britain's courage and fortitude in the Second World War and its alliance with

the US and USSR – the 'other' superpowers at the time. In this story, membership of the EU emasculates Britain by rendering it equal to the European nations it liberated and defeated, affronting its hard-won status as a global power.

Inspiring perhaps, but as history, this story is deeply flawed. It misunderstands two important things: how the empire related to British power in the early twentieth century on the one hand, and the nature of the British imperial state on the other.

Far from being a sign of Britain's global strength, the expansion of Britain's imperial responsibility after World War I was in fact a significant catalyst of its decline. The priority of earlier empire-builders was to trade and make money. Establishing a government in foreign territory was hugely expensive and was pursued only if it was the best way to secure favourable trading rights. The Paris peace treaties after the First World War followed a different logic. Through the League of Nations mandate system, Britain gained responsibility for territories, including Palestine and Iraq, in which it had no previous economic interest. Though prestigious, in reality these acquisitions represented little but increased costs to the British economy.

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What about the established parts of the British Empire, particularly the jewel in its crown, India? The interwar years saw massive expansion of state infrastructure in India, including new schools, hospitals, universities and legislatures. Thousands of Britons sailed to the subcontinent to serve as civil servants, doctors, academics and engineers. The major driver of these changes was the 1917 promise by Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, that, in return for its significant military and financial contributions to World War I, the British Government would help India move towards self-government, albeit slowly and with no definite timetable. In an ironic parallel, Theresa May's government estimates that it will need up to 30,000 additional civil servants to manage Brexit, though few of us celebrate this fact as an indication of British power.

The economic imperatives of empire required that India, rather than the British taxpayer, was to pay for these reforms. However, fears that this could trigger revolt ensured that, in practice, these post-war developments were poorly funded. This point was not lost on Indian leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, who protested that an Indian government that would channel Indian funds back into India would do far more to improve and modernise Indian society than an imperial state that was effectively a parasite. In 1939, when Viceroy Linlithgow declared war on Germany on India's behalf without consulting elected Indian representatives, he made it impossible to claim that Britain was ruling India for anything other than Britain's own interests.

During World War II, British officials ruled India in a direct and authoritarian manner. Indian soldiers were deployed across the globe and factories and resources were requisitioned, with the result that in Bengal in 1943 three million people starved to death. Such brutal rule made a mockery of Britain's role as a liberator on the larger stage. It was also more than Britain could afford: by the end of the war it owed India about £1.25 billion. Ruling India had become a liability.

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The second major flaw in the Leavers' account of history is their understanding of the imperial state at home. Brexiteers fail to recognise, or perhaps choose to ignore, that the social divisions on which imperial government was based didn't exist only in India or the Middle East. Hierarchy, prejudice and elitism also structured government in the UK.

Before the First World War, women and working-class men had no say in who would govern them. Healthcare and education, beyond the basic primary level, were available only to the wealthy. 'The people', far from being the embodiment of 'British sovereignty', were the object of fear and derision by the ruling classes.

The basic tenets of what we consider today to be British democracy – universal franchise and the welfare state – are relatively recent developments, won from the ruling classes through the efforts and sacrifices of ordinary people and by the Labour government after World War II.

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The deaths of millions of soldiers, of all races and classes in two global conflicts, alongside the hardships and sacrifices endured by civilians across the world to support the Allied war effort, blew a hole in the myth that a select few were entitled to govern the lives of the many. For the first time, it became possible to think of a global citizenry, of the shared rights and responsibilities of all those who had shouldered the burdens of war.

In Britain, this new vision of human equality underpinned the founding of the NHS – a health service free at the point of delivery for everyone living in Britain, regardless of wealth, religion, gender or race. The institution that many now see as the cornerstone of the British welfare state could not have been conceived within the imperial mind-set that had governed British politics before the Second World War. In fact, it's unlikely that the NHS would have been born at all were it not for the winding down of British imperialism overseas: a major incentive for the British Government to accept Indian independence in 1947, rather than face its war debt and maintain power, came from the new Labour Government's desire to use its finances to look after the health of British citizens rather than keep colonial subjects in the Empire.

Why does all this matter? We need to question the Brexiteers' view of history because their understanding of the past tells us how they view British democracy in the present, and what they want for the future. That the UKIP leader and candidate in the Stoke by-election,

Paul Nuttall, defends the 'glories' of the British Empire while calling for the NHS to be privatised shows how the dream of imperialism abroad countenances an indifference to inequality at home.

A proper, historically accurate understanding of our past is vital if we are to be clearer about the kind of society we want to become –and about what Brexit is likely to mean for the future of our democracy.