Opinion

Britain Is Drowning Itself in Nostalgia

Brexit has exposed my country as a solipsistic backwater.

By Sam Byers
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LONDON — Recently, in the comforting gloom of a half-empty cinema, I found myself subjected to an advertisement for the country in which I live. A series of Britain’s cultural and sporting great and good, interspersed with “normal” people, rode in taxis, strode through the airport and squeezed themselves into economy class. “Dear Britain,” they said, taking turns with the lines while stowing their luggage and settling into their seats. “Dear old Britain. We love you … The way you pick yourself up when things get tough … How you follow your own path … How you tell it like it is (politely, of course!) … You’ve led revolutions of all kinds, yet you won’t shout about it, it’s just not in your nature. Instead, you’ll quietly make history.” At the end, cozily occupying the sweet spot between the roundly unifying and the rapidly uncontroversial, Olivia Colman, who recently won an Oscar for playing Queen Anne, said something about tea.

As an ad celebrating British Airways, an international airline, it’s strikingly devoid of internationalism. As a hymn to the solipsistic backwater we’ve become, it’s painfully apt. If Britain were an airline, we’d be very much like the one British Airways gives us in its ad — idling on the runway, sipping our tea and mumbling our self-congratulatory eulogies, reveling in our isolation because all sense of a destination has disappeared.

The ad speaks to the experience of living in Britain at this moment. It’s not just our political life that feels suffused with the toxicity of Brexit, but also our cultural and even personal lives, too. At dinner with friends and family, on our couches in front of the television, even in our attempts at cinematic escape, there is only one subject of conversation: our departure from the European Union, the need to either oppose it or enact it. As we walk the supermarket aisles,
speculating as to the continuing availability of our favorite foods, as we sit with our European loved ones and try to convince ourselves of the security of their stay, as we lay out the day’s medicines and fret about the continuing viability of their procurement, Brexit is inescapable.

But something else is inescapable, too, because Brexit is so bound up with “Britishness”— that never- quite-defined and often nebulous shared culture that has become as impossible to avoid. Brexit is not just an event, it is a feeling — suffocating and dispiriting and freighted with gloom. With no refuge from that feeling, we seek solace in another: national pride.

March 29 was supposed to be the date Britain exited the European Union. In the 33 months since our narrow decision to do that, our political paralysis around the terms of our departure has reached a terminal, possibly fatal state. The deal that Prime Minister Theresa May negotiated with Brussels was robustly defeated in Parliament — twice. Yet now, she must bring it back for a third time. If the deal cannot be agreed upon, we very well might, after a derisory extension of two weeks, leave without a deal at all — an eventuality that Parliament has already rejected as too calamitous.

So we’re all agreed: In our bid to “quietly make history,” we would prefer a deal that does not in fact exist and for which there is no time left to negotiate because we’ve spent all of our time getting a deal we don’t want, meaning that now we’re readying ourselves to sidestep the humiliation of a deal we don't like by accepting the ruin of a non-deal we don't like either. We are, in almost every sense, on a plane to nowhere, and because we have nowhere to go, we have to convince ourselves that nowhere is exactly where we wish to be.

With nothing meaningful to say about our future, we’ve retreated into the falsehoods of the past, painting over the absence of certainty at our core with a whitewash of poisonous nostalgia. The result is that Britain has entered a haunted dreamscape of collective dementia — a half-waking state in which the previous day or hour is swiftly erased and the fantasies of the previous century leap vividly to the fore. Turning on the television or opening Twitter, we find people who have no memory of the Second World War invoking a kind of blitz spirit, or succumbing to fits of self-righteous fury because someone has dared to impugn the legacy of Winston Churchill.

At the same time, in our determination to rekindle the embers of our cooling significance, we seem perfectly happy to burn the future of our young for fuel. Efforts by students to counter the colonial arrogance that has been our ruin by decolonizing the curriculum have been met with sputtering, insecure outrage. Recently, a group of students (and future voters) protesting the government’s hopeless stance on climate change were dismissed as mere truants by a leading member of the Conservative Party. We’re so obsessed with our past that we cannot, any longer, even countenance a future. To protect that past, we seem prepared to abandon the future entirely, to tell ourselves that there is no future, just as to British Airways there are apparently no countries to fly to.

The problem with all this self-deluding preservation of the past isn’t just that it’s regressive, or alienating for those of us who don’t spend our time musing on Churchill’s legacy or swelling with pride at our good fortune to accidentally be born British; it’s that it pollutes and stagnates
even the discourse that ought to oppose it.

The Brexiteers aren't alone in wanting to turn back time and behave as if certain significant events never happened. A look at the more unequivocal end of the pro-European Union spectrum of British political life — the die-hard Remainers — finds similar retrospection. The referendum result, they claim, was not a statement but a mistake: the consequence not so much of mass dissatisfaction and a decades-long tabloid project of anti-European propaganda but of a plot to subvert our democracy. Their solution? To hold another referendum, magically erasing both the bitter divisions of the intervening years and the social and political conditions that nurtured anti-European Union rage in the first place.

In an age of hidebound regression, moving forward becomes inseparable from looking backward and inward. Frustrated by what they see as the outdated and ineffective deadlock of the two-party political orthodoxy, a shiny new breakaway faction has emerged in Parliament called The Independent Group. Pressed for clarity on such tiresome details as policy, one of its more significant members, the ex-Tory Anna Soubry, defensively claimed that even to ask such a thing was the “old way” of politics, and that this group is based on “shared values.” The slightest scratch at the surface of those values, however, reveals nothing new whatsoever, with the No. 1 shared value, as listed on their website, turning out to be the drably predictable
assertion that “Ours is a great country of which people are rightly proud.” It’s the same old pillar of jingoism and self-regard to which, it increasingly seems, everyone must genuflect before, or even in place of, saying anything else at all.

Here, ultimately, lies the Gordian knot at the heart of Britain’s predicament: To shape from our current inertia a meaningful future, we need to address the brutal reality of the present. We are not quietly leading any revolutions right now, unless one counts as a revolution our project of self-dismantlement.

We’re the world’s fifth-largest economy and likely to sink to seventh this year. Industry and finance are falling over themselves to flee. Nor am I convinced that anyone should be “rightly proud” of a country in which, according to the homelessness charity Crisis, the number of people sleeping on the streets has risen 140 percent since 2010; in which over a million emergency food packages were given to those struggling financially in the 2017-18 financial year; in which over 4 million children are living in poverty; and in which local councils in England face an £8 billion financial black hole by 2025, endangering not only their upkeep of communal spaces, but also their ability to provide adequate care for children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Indeed, when the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights visited Britain last year, his verdict was damning, depicting not a nation “picking itself up when things get tough” and “quietly making history” but a society in which, as he put it, “British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean spirited and often callous approach.” We are even, in point of fact, going off tea.

Our inability to state difficult truths without first offering some reassuring patriotism accounts, in some ways, for the failure of the Remain argument. In making a negative case against leaving the European Union — that it will cause irreparable harm to the economy, that vital flows of food and medicine may be disrupted, that we will consign ourselves to bit-part status on the global stage — Remainers’ concerns have been dismissed as traitorous fantasy, the manipulative catastrophizing of what Brexiteers call “Project Fear”

And so, all too often, Remainers reach for the same dreamy jingoism as those who would have us violently depart the European Union with no terms in place. There is no patriotic argument for Remain because Brexit itself is a cautionary argument against blind national pride. It’s precisely this empty, hopeless paradox that in June 2016 led to Prime Minister David Cameron, in a last-ditch effort to persuade voters to side with the European Union, telling us, pathetically, that “Brits don’t quit.” It’s also, one assumes, why in January a group of German political leaders and prominent figures encouraging Britain to stay in the Union wrote an open letter not to make a case for Brussels but to appeal to our beverage-sipping sense of self, writing that if we left, they would miss “going to the pub after work hours to drink an ale” and “tea with milk and driving on the left-hand side of the road” — a gale of pure wind with all the meaninglessness of a British Airways ad.
So here we are, facing more delays and uncertainty. The Defense Ministry reportedly is hunkering down in a nuclear bunker, preparing for “no deal,” a crash headlong into a future from which we mistakenly thought our past would protect us. We are pathologically unable to say what needs to be said: that nostalgia, exceptionalism and a xenophobic failure of the collective imagination have undone us. This is not a time of national pride, it is a moment of deep and lasting national shame. We are unable to lead yet determined never to follow. We have nothing of note to say and yet still refuse to listen. The very forces that have shored up our self-regard and poisoned our place in history are about to erode us from within, and unless we find in ourselves the humility we’ve always abhorred, we face a brutal and potentially permanent humbling.

Cups of tea will neither turn back time nor show us, in their cold and increasingly bitter leaves, the future we’ve failed to imagine: a future in which what limited achievements we might have been proud of — our system of social care, our commitment to protecting the people least able to protect themselves — lie in ruins, and all we can do is sit in the dark, paying our favorite celebrities to chant to us, over and over again, our tattered mantra of virtue.

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