

Britain after Brexit: Welcome to the Vulture Restaurant

US business will asset-strip the UK, but that's not all: the Pentagon will find the little-known fragments of the British empire very useful.

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*"Britain has no leverage, Britain is desperate ... it needs an agreement very soon. When you have a desperate partner, that's when you strike the hardest bargain." So [warned](#) former US treasury secretary **Larry Summers** on Radio 4 'Today' programme this morning, as new foreign secretary Dominic Raab jets off on a tour of North America to investigate potential trade deals.*

"Britain has much less to give than Europe as a whole did, therefore less reason for the United States to make concessions," said Summers, a senior figure in both the Clinton and Obama administrations. "You make more concessions dealing with a wealthy man than you do dealing with a poor man."

Summers is of course right. But he makes a key mistake. He assumes that Raab, Johnson and the new cabinet care about defending the interests and autonomy of most people in the UK. He seems to be under the impression that Brexit was about taking back control.

In reality, the brand of Brexit promoted by Tory hardliners has long been about pulling Britain under the shadow of American capital. Not as a 51st state, with votes and constitutional rights, but as an outhouse for US business, a sort of colder, paler version of Puerto Rico.

We will be forced to accept US-style deregulation, with its poor standards for workers and consumers. We will have our assets stripped clean off the bone. Even before Brexit, we are fast becoming a pawn in the Pentagon's global games.

We won't become Americans, though. We'll have no say in the standards that will govern our new Atlantic common market. Nor will we be permitted to help decide who stands in the planet's biggest pulpit. Nor will we have much significant say in our own foreign policy. The UK has chosen to shift from participating in one power block to sitting on the outer edges of another.

Victory of the lobbyists

If that wasn't clear before ([though it was](#)), the events surrounding the arrival of Boris Johnson in Downing Street have confirmed it.

During the leadership election there was, of course, the failure to defend Kim Darroch, the

British ambassador to the US. Then there is the ongoing confrontation with Iran, in which Britain's post-empire is being enlisted in the schemes of US neoconservatives. There is [the revelation](#) that a new US pro-Brexit campaign group has launched, and Steve Bannon's insistence on 'Today' that Boris Johnson should deliver a "no deal, hard out".

Over the past three years, we've seen Britain's lobbying industry and think-tanks auction their access to our politicians off to US corporations and oligarchs - from the firm which ran Johnson's leadership campaign [bragging in](#) Washington about its ability to shape Brexit for US business, to the Institute for Economic Affairs offering to broker meetings between senior ministers and US companies wishing to [get their piece of the Brexit pie](#).

We've seen one former Washington lobbyist - [Shanker Singham](#) - move to London and secure unprecedented access to our politicians, even writing the so-called Malthouse compromise, while lobbyists also drove the team that [ensured their preferred candidate](#) was elected prime minister.

And now that they've got their Johnson in place lobbyists have [taken over the](#) cabinet.

We've seen Trump confirm that "everything" - including the NHS - "will be on the table" in a US trade deal, before his spin-doctors reminded him that he's not supposed to say that out loud.

"Britain Trump"

We see it in the ascent of Johnson himself - a rise which has coincided with the arrival in the UK of the sorts of institutions and culture we're more used to watching from a safe distance across the Atlantic. On openDemocracy, we've revealed how [Definers Public Affairs](#), the smear machine which destroyed Hillary Clinton, has [set up shop in the UK](#), how a [US-style super PAC](#) is being rolled out across Europe and how Brexit is the biggest outsourcing of public policy in British history.

Johnson, who has surfed this wave, has been anointed "Britain Trump" by his US admirer. It's a fair nickname, not because they have the same character, but because they both epitomise the elitist myths embedded in their respective national characters. Trump is the millionaire's son who pretends to be rich because of merit, the brash bully-boy billionaire in a culture whose dream equates wealth and cruelty with merit and success.

Johnson, on the other hand, comes from the school on whose playing fields the battle of Waterloo was mythologically won. He epitomises an Anglo-British exceptionalism built on a mystical link between nation, royalty and aristocracy: a link forged in [the failed revolution](#) of the civil war and bought with imperial plunder, and which reminds the British bourgeois of an era when you didn't need to do your homework to attain power - you got it by dint of your nation, gender, class and skin colour.

Likewise, their identikit ideologies are the same: oligarch enrichment woven round national mythologies.

Johnson pretends to be a free trader in the way that earlier British politicians claimed to support free trade whilst using their military might to force China to buy opium, commit genocide in Tasmania and smash up cotton looms in India. Trump claims to be a protectionist just as earlier US presidents used a pretence of isolationism to pretend they

weren't building an empire, at the same time preaching that the US was manifestly and justifiably destined to conquer the whole North American continent, committing genocide against Native American peoples as they did so.

Both Trump and Johnson have been contorted by the distorting lenses of their respective nationalisms, confusing many into thinking that they ooze truth or charm or talent. Strip off those red white and blue tinted goggles and you quickly see them for what they are: rich racists willing to trample anyone to secure the world for their kind.

Ultimately, they both represent the same interwoven set of interests: oligarchs, mafiosi, disaster capitalists, Gulf oil millionaires, hedge fund speculators and any other corner of the elite which has spotted that the neoliberal era is coming to an end, they have few places left to invest and their best option is to hide away as much money as they can behind the biggest walls they can build.

This is what Johnson meant when he said "fuck business" - that he and his friends no longer have anything invested in traditional industries, so are happy to see them disappear. It is why Trump is perfectly happy to [fuck America's car industry](#) as he slashes tax for the hyper-rich.

Useful scraps of empire

At openDemocracy, we've revealed how millions of pounds were pumped into the Leave campaigns in the first place. That money came through the same British Overseas Territory and Crown Dependency secrecy areas that the billionaires of the world use to stash the cash they can no longer figure out how to get a return from - the same post-empire that the Pentagon is so keen to get a closer grip on.

For while the UK's network of semi-colonies is useful as a money-laundry for the world's oligarchs, we've seen in recent weeks how it plays a different strategic role, too - why America might see it as a valuable asset to begin to enclose under its wings.

When the British territory of Gibraltar captured an Iranian tanker, supposedly to enforce an EU embargo against oil to Syria, it did so despite the fact that Iran isn't in the EU, and the EU doesn't force non-members to comply with its embargoes. The Spanish have, [according to The Guardian](#), claimed that the UK is acting under the influence of the US, and the former Swedish prime minister and senior EU figure Carl Bildt has hinted as much. It looks very much like this wasn't so much an act of British foreign policy as one of submission to the US Department of Defense.

Britain captured Gibraltar in 1704 because of its strategically important location. To this day, one-third of the world's oil and gas passes through its straits. Likewise, another strategically vital waterway will define this conflict: the Gulf of Oman, which connects the Strait of Hormuz to the Arabian sea. Oman isn't formally a British territory, but it has been a de facto UK colony since the nineteenth century, with London helping to prop up the slave-owning ruling family over two centuries. As [Ian Cobain has outlined](#), its current sultan was put in place by an MI6 coup in 1970.

The relationship remains strong. Shell [owns 30%](#) of the national oil company and Britain's military presence is significant. According to [Duncan Campbell](#), the journalist who originally revealed the existence of GCHQ, the [Snowden leaks revealed](#) Oman hosts a vital British

intelligence base, tapping the vast number of communications cables that run under the Gulf. Last year, the UK opened a permanent naval base in the country, and in February this year, the British government [announced](#) it had signed an historic defence agreement with the sultanate, “bringing us even closer to one of our most important partners”.

For those with long memories, this might start sounding familiar: the 45-minute claim intended to frighten the British into accepting the 2003 Iraq war was based on the claim that Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction could be ready to deploy not against London, but against the British Overseas Territories in Cyprus.

If the Pentagon is to keep a firm grip on the world, Britain’s post-imperial web of semi-colonies will be vital fingerholds, and Brexit offers the US a unique opportunity to expand its control over the UK and its overseas assets.

The Great British Asset Striptease

This wasn’t inevitable. In theory, Brexit could genuinely have been about ‘taking back control’ for the British people. It would be possible to turn the UK into a new Cuba, for instance, substituting home-grown products for international imports. Not a suggestion that would please the millions of Leave voters who opted to quit the EU essentially because they wanted to become another Japan instead: wealthier than the UK, industrialised, with less income inequality, richly forested and deeply racist.

But these are not the options before us.

Instead, Brexit means plonking the corpse of post-imperial Britain in a vulture restaurant for US asset strippers, and pretending not to notice that China perches nearby, ready to pluck at whatever it fancies too.

The Great British Asset Striptease isn’t new, of course. For decades, the country has mostly stayed afloat in the world by auctioning off the plunder we accumulated through centuries of empire. As Joe Guinan and Thomas Hanna [point out](#), the Treasury has calculated that Britain sold off [40 per cent](#) of all assets privatised across the OECD between 1980 and 1996.

But as the new foreign secretary heads off on his ‘everything must go’ tour of North America, the people of the UK are going to have to fight hard to stop him selling the whole country to Trump and his friends. Just as thousands mobilised against the EU-US trade deal known as TTIP, we’re going to have to stand together and fight against any UK/US trade deal. We’re going to have to fight to protect our public services and our workers’ rights and our ecosystems from the new plunderers of the planet. Because Britain doesn’t have any power in its negotiations with Trump. And we have a government that will be delighted to turn the country into an offshore theme park for American, Saudi and Chinese billionaires.

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