

Britain, France , US: ‘And the Winner is ...’ In the Lifestyle Sweepstakes, the Answer is “None of the Above”.

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In the lifestyle sweepstakes, the answer is “none of the above”.

The economic and social experiments in the past three decades by British governments from left to right have left the plucky Brits reeling, as this summer’s unprecedented bread and ipod riots showed all too conclusively. For a year now, fiscal austerity and financial chaos have sent Britain’s economy into a nasty cycle of low growth and rising unemployment.

But unlike Greece, which was forced into recession by misguided EU taskmasters, Britain has inflicted this on itself. Austerity was a deliberate choice by Prime Minister David Cameron’s ruling coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Britain’s jobless numbers are the highest in more than 15 years, with unemployment 8.1 per cent, as the government continues to slash public-sector jobs — more than 100,000 have been lost in recent months.

This call to “balance the books” is also being preached by US President Barack Obama, where even higher unemployment figures (9.1 per cent) and far worse financial woes exacerbate the economic downturn. By slashing government spending, hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost there too, with the expected downward multiplier effect as citizens are force to rein in their spending, leading to ever higher unemployment and ever falling government revenues.

Austerity is politics masquerading as economic policy, intent on lowering wages while maintaining the profit and interest income of the rich in hard times. It rests on the myth that all government spending is wasteful and eats into potential private investment, and is unnecessary to recovery. Just as bad as this hidden agenda is that the result of this stab-in-the-back to the “99 per cent” is to actually increase the government deficit — the very opposite of what is intended.

But if things are bad for Britain, it can perhaps find some consolation in the fact that, for the first time in more than 100 years, British living standards have “risen” above American standards, according to an Oxford Economics (OE) report. The OE explains that increasing incomes for Brits and longer holidays (Americans average two weeks per year vs five weeks in Britain) and free healthcare mean that the Brits are better off than the Yanks, whose real income today is about the same as it was in the 1970s.

It is perhaps not unusual that a British study might conclude that Brits have the edge on their American brothers. After all, as Mark Twain was fond of saying, there are “lies, damned lies, and statistics” (ironically for OE, the term was coined by British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli). But what about Britain vs Europe? A study published last week by the *uSwitch.com* consumer website claims that Britain has the worst quality of life in Europe, and — surprise — France the best.

British workers work three years longer and die two years younger than the French, while they pay more for fuel, food, alcohol and cigarettes. The study compared 17 lifestyle factors in France, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Italy, Sweden, Ireland and Britain, and estimated that while Britain had the highest net household income, this was eaten up by a much higher cost of living.

British workers work the longest hours (apart from the Poles) and have the shortest vacations. They are also near the bottom in terms of health and education spending, and — through no fault of their own — sunshine. The French come out on top in all these categories. Said Ann Robinson, head of consumer policy at the British firm: “We earn substantially more than our European neighbours, but this level of income is needed just to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table and our homes warm.” The report will please no one (except the French) so we can assume its gloomy conclusion is unfortunately on the mark.

Sifting through these “damned lies”, it seems that the quality of life in Britain is the worst in Europe though still better than in the US. But this is to be expected, given the 20th century imperial legacy of Britain, Europe and the US. Britain was the “great” empire of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, and in keeping with the logic of empire, was, at its peak, able to amass wealth from its empire and impose its pound sterling as the world’s reserve currency, with all the economic and political advantages that implies, putting even lowly workers among the beneficiaries.

The imperial dreams of France and other European powers were nipped in the bud by the insatiable Disraelis (and Churchills). But empire has its dark side. Economically, the inflow of gold and wealth to the centre eventually turns into an outflow, as capitalists and bankers look abroad for greater profit. Meanwhile, the state is left financing colonial infrastructure and a growing military, necessary to keep the natives in line and to keep the colonial revenues flowing to the motherland. And then there is the need to quell competing empires (the French again, not to mention the Gerries). The 18-19th cc wars with France and the 20th century wars with the Germans bankrupted the British empire, and finally left the US as the empire’s heir.

The exact same logic has plagued the post-WWII American empire with results that are only too obvious today. It faced off against the Soviet Union and now is mired in the futile attempt to conquer the Middle East and Central Asia, destroying itself in the process — and leaving the American people with falling living standards.

Despite Britain’s lack of natural resources, by shedding its empire and adopting socialist policies, its quality of life actually improved dramatically after WWII. A smaller pie more equitably distributed is far better for the masses than a huge, fractious banquet for the elite one per cent, where only crumbs are passed on to the other 99.

The continuing British malaise today is the direct result of two poisonous factors. First, the continuing imperial pretensions that its elite has, prompting its governments, Conservative and Labour alike, to send troops to the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Libya to support its own residual empire or that of its imperial comrade-in-arms. The ongoing imbroglios in Afghanistan and Libya are now draining British coffers of billions of pounds, even as its government slashes the social programmes thanks to which the British worker's standard of living has now risen above his/her hapless American counterpart.

The malaise is also the result more broadly of the neoliberal policies of the Iron Lady, who managed to realise her perverse philosophy that "there is no such thing as society" by dismantling much of the social welfare structure of post-WWII Britain. The result was far from what prime minister Margaret Thatcher expected. Her ideal was "a return to Victorian liberal values, but instead of the Victorian virtues of stability and thrift, the result was a largely proletarian society, characterised by shiftlessness ("flexible labor market"), low inflation and high personal debt, where the state now promotes only the interests of the corporate individuals, and suppresses truly "liberal" social forces like unions. It is better called market totalitarianism. "As Marx perceived, the actual effect of the unfettered market is to overturn established social relationships and forms of ethical life — including those of bourgeois societies," laments critique John Gray.

The only saving grace for Britain is that it is no longer left holding the imperial bag. It can always pack up and leave — with apologies to the Yanks. It is now a "postmodern state", along with its fellow Europeans, content to let the Americans make the decisions about who to invade. As for the smug French, their neo-Napoleon at the helm seems intent on catching up with the poor Brits in the race to the Euro-bottom, and repeating all the mistakes of the 20th century in his hallmark frenetic style.

If French President Nicolas Sarkozy has his way (pushing for more imperial interventions, cutting pensions and education spending, raising the retirement age and much more), the next study could well show the French "winning" this race. But not to fear, since the Americans, as the current imperial bag-holder, are guaranteed to be at the bottom of the heap.

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