

# The UK gave away an empire but does not lack a role

One of the more absurd common truths is the one that says the UK lost an empire and now lacks a role. It is allied to the dangerous notion that the UK has to place itself under EU or US control to be a main player or to “have influence”.

The UK rightly gave away the empire. It had no wish to hang on to it after 1945, fighting battles against independence movements in the way some did. Nor does it lack influence or a role. As the world's fifth largest economy with one of the most powerful militaries after the big two of the USA and China, the UK has a seat on the UN Security Council, and is an important voice again in a range of world bodies from the World Trade Organisation to the environmental conferences to the World Health organisation. When the UK has world class research and confidence in its own views and beliefs it can achieve a great deal through its soft power. As a leading member of NATO it belongs to the world's most powerful military organisation, where it can bring force to bear with allies for a good cause if it agrees to do so. The UK has in recent decades a good record at protecting or liberating smaller countries from bullying invasions. Alone we evicted Argentina from the Falklands, and led by our US allies we freed Kuwait.

From my study of English and UK history our past underlines the kind of people we are and the role in the world that we wish to define and refine. We have always looked outwards, favouring free trade with as many parts of the world as will reciprocate. We have been on a long march to representative democracy, and have always been hungry for liberty. There are strong strands of anticlericalism in our roots that manifest today as sensible scepticism about some of the fashionable nostras of world tyrants and global bureaucracies. There is in us that respect for the rule of law and the form of the constitutions, tempered by a tough strain of protest if our liberties are too pinched by authority or if the rules are bent too far by government. Failure to understand that lost a King his head, cost later sovereigns power, and lost some Prime Ministers their jobs. It led us to Brexit when the public told their elites that they were promised a common market and ended up with a powerful international body making many of our laws and deciding some of our taxes.

Slow to anger as a democratic people, preferring the paths of peace, we as a nation fight doggedly and accept sacrifice if an aggressive autocrat seeks to take over independent countries. In the sixteenth century England and Wales stood almost alone against the might of superpower Spain, helping the Netherlands in revolt against Spanish autocracy. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Great Britain organised Europe against the French superpower's attempts to take over much of the continent by conquest. In the twentieth century twice we had to fight against German aggression and German attempts to create a united Europe against the will and freedoms of many of Europe's countries.

It would be good if we can now avoid damaging European entanglements as we wish the EU success in creating a peaceful resolution of the various tensions and disputes between continental countries. There is no need for us to lead the questions of how the EU defines and defends its eastern borders. The USA and ourselves in NATO need to define limits to those who would threaten us through eastern Europe but should not get involved in the Balkans and former Soviet Union issues which currently preoccupy the EU. We may independently decide to help a country in distress from Russian invasion as we do with Ukraine.

One of the worst features of the governing elite in my lifetime has been the pessimism and lack of belief in our abilities as a country to influence the world for good and to prosper without being controlled by a larger power from outside. This has been allied to their dreadful run of boom/bust and austerity advice since the early 1970s, leading to an underperformance of our economy. Their poor economic policy feeds their wish to impose greater international strictures and controls on us. Why do they forget this is the country that not so long ago designed the first large working computer to break codes, developed the jet engine, built the world's first civil nuclear power plant and with France produced the only supersonic passenger aircraft? The UK can achieve a lot, and would achieve a lot more if more of its governing elite had confidence in us.