

# Are Britain and Europe becoming ‘vassalised’?



*The term ‘vassal state’ has been frequently used by those warning against a post-Brexit relationship that leaves the UK obliged to adopt EU rules or subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. Yet as [Glyn Morgan](#) writes, there is a paradox in the use of the term given the EU’s power on the international stage is increasingly constrained by China and the United States. The EU is now facing up to the prospect that it is less imperialist than imperialised: vassals, in short, of powers it cannot control.*

A new term of political debate haunts contemporary Europe: *vassalisation*. The term first appeared in its cognate form – *vassal state* – in the later stages of the Brexit debate. Hard Brexiteers (most notably [Boris Johnson](#) and [Jacob Rees-Mogg](#)) deployed the term regularly with great rhetorical flourish against their softer fellow-travellers. Anyone willing to allow a post-Brexit role for the European Court of Justice (ECJ) was damned as an advocate of a vassal state.

The term then took flight across the channel where it now enjoys a dual usage. [President Macron](#) uses the term to warn the British of the fate that awaits them outside the European Union. Post-Brexit, he claims, Britain will become “a vassal state, ... the junior partner of the United States.” The French Finance Minister [Bruno Le Maire](#) uses the term in a more general sense to warn of the diminished fate that awaits Europe:

“Vassalisation is when the US imposes extraterritorial sanctions on the European Union. It’s when they impose tariffs on steel and aluminium that will directly affect the lives of workers and the steel plants of northern France. Vassalisation is when China decides to buy entire chunks of strategic infrastructure in Europe. Vassalisation is when self-driving cars will have American navigation systems and Asian batteries.”

We can learn a lot from the emergence of new terms of political debate. Politics is, at least in part, a linguistically constituted sphere of human conflict. We want to understand *why* new terms enjoy current popularity, *who* deploys them, *whether* they possess any normative merit, and *how* they fit together with the fundamental ideas of our public political culture – ideas such as liberty, equality, and democracy.

The term *vassalisation* (and its cognates *vassal state* and *vassalised*) clearly reflects a current European-wide anxiety about relative power. The EU finds itself in a G2 world, where it must confront an American President who embraces an America-First foreign policy and learn to live with a newly assertive China. Until recently, EU [politicians](#) and [scholars](#) were happily talking of the EU as an Empire. Now it seems that they need to consider the prospect that Europe is less imperialist than imperialised: vassals, in short, of powers (both personal and impersonal) that they cannot control.

It’s both surprising and unsurprising that the new language of vassalisation first appeared in Britain. Ever since the United States put an end to the British Empire, the British have been worrying about their standing in the world. This worry only grew worse, when they finally noticed in the late 1950s that the newly formed Common Market threatened to diminish Britain’s standing even further. [Harold Macmillan](#) captured the concern, when he asked: “Shall we be caught between a hostile (or at least less friendly) America and a boastful but powerful empire of Charlemagne, now under French but later bound to come under German control?” His even greater fear was that the US, France, and Germany would form closer ties at the expense of Britain. That might have led to a very embarrassing early form of vassalisation.

Yet if Britain has always been anxious about its standing in the world, why has the language of vassalisation appeared now? And why was it deployed so regularly in blue-on-blue intra-governmental squabbles over Britain’s post-Brexit future? Answers to these questions lie, I think, in a peculiar British obsession with an outmoded idea of sovereignty. For people on the more extreme Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, sovereignty is entirely a matter of ultimate legal authority rather than the material benefits that a form of political authority might deliver. This line of thinking was clearly on display in the reaction of [Martin Howe](#) QC (the legal advisor to the European Reform Group) to then Prime Minister Theresa May’s Chequers Plan of July 2018:

“These proposals lead directly to a worst of all worlds, a Black Hole Brexit where the UK is stuck permanently as a Vassal State in the EU’s legal and regulatory tarpit, still has to obey EU Laws and ECJ rulings across vast areas, cannot develop an effective trade policy, or adapt our economy to take advantage of the freedom of Brexit, and has lost its vote and treaty veto rights as an EU member state.”

From this perspective, the UK is only a self-governing democracy when it possesses ultimate legal authority. Shared sovereignty – whether de jure as a member of the EU, or de facto as would be the case if the UK accepted ECJ rulings – entails vassalage. Better to possess full legal sovereignty even if that were to mean accepting less advantageous terms of trade. Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven – as Milton’s Satan put it. This judgement reflects a set of normative assumptions about the point, the very purpose of political authority. Do we form political associations (whether states or supranational unions) primarily for instrumental or expressive reasons? Different wings of the Eurosceptics split on that question. Vassalage as a term of political abuse seemed to emerge in the context of that split.

New terms of political debate invite us to go beyond mere explanation of why the terms emerged and who deploys them. We also want to know whether the terms can bear any normative weight. Clearly, *vassalage* belongs in the same general family category as *imperialism*. Both words serve to identify (and condemn) a political process or outcome that creates or sustains a powerful Centre against a less powerful Periphery. The context for these terms, in short, is a *wrongful form of asymmetrical power*. The task for political theorists working with these terms is to work out – as [Lea Ypi has done for colonialism](#) – moral and political theories that can explicate the nature of the wrong at issue. As Europe loses relative economic and political power to China and the United States, we can expect to see a lot more attention to this topic in the coming years.

**For more information, see the author’s accompanying paper in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)**

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