

The power of the Anglosphere in Eurosceptical thought

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2015/12/10/anglosphere-is-the-other-side-of-the-eurosceptic-coin-a-conception-of-britains-identity-and-place-in-the-world/

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*The idea of the Anglosphere is an important element of British Euroscepticism. **Ben Wellings** and **Helen Baxendale** show that calls for unity of purpose between English-speaking peoples offer Eurosceptics an alternative political community to the European Union, and one that aligns history, culture and politics more closely than does Britain's membership of the EU. Although the Anglosphere does not yet constitute a viable political alternative to Britain's EU membership, articulating it helps Eurosceptics imagine a UK outside the European Union.*

The rise in Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party after 2010 was preceded by a decade of discussion about the existence of the so-called 'Anglosphere' as a viable alternative to the UK's membership of the European Union. Amidst all the searching for Swiss or Norwegian models for Britain's relationship with the EU, some Eurosceptics advanced the Anglosphere in response to criticisms about the lack of an alternative vision to European integration.

Euroscepticism and the Anglosphere

Speaking in the debate on the Maastricht treaty in 1992, the Conservative Minister for Europe, Tristan Garel-Jones posed the question that always caused some awkward silences amongst British Eurosceptics: 'Can the anti-federalists, the Euro-sceptics and little Englanders offer a positive alternative?'

Reflecting on this in *The Spectator*, Tim Congdon floated a response: the English-speaking peoples or what was increasingly being referred to as the 'Anglosphere'. From the late 1990s, exponents of the 'Anglosphere' idea argued that the English-speaking nations are distinguished by a set of institutions and characteristics that the other advanced nations of Europe ultimately lack: a common law tradition, respect for private property, continuous representative government, and a culture that nurtures civil society and entrepreneurial enterprise.

Emerging in the late 1990s, the Anglosphere idea is, in essence, a proposal for an international organisation that accommodates and celebrates the history, culture and institutions that many hard Eurosceptics believe make Britain different from the continent. It is, in short, a mutual political association that variously includes the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, the English-speaking Caribbean islands and Singapore, all dedicated to free trade and greater military and security cooperation that could constitute, in Robert Conquest's words, 'a centre of hope in the world ... around which peace, cooperation, and democracy can develop'.

The Anglosphere idea has proven attractive to prominent British Eurosceptics. Margaret Thatcher, David Willetts, John Redwood, Daniel Hannan, David Davis, Norman Lamont, Liam Fox, Bill Cash, Michael Howard, and William Rees-Mogg all wrote or spoke in support of increased cooperation across the Anglosphere, with their ideas often published or promoted in Conrad Black's and Rupert Murdoch's media outlets.



Commonwealth Day flags in Parliament Square 2013. [Photo](#) credit: CC BY-SA 2.0

Britain, Europe and the English-speaking Peoples

Although sentimental ties to the Commonwealth and the wider English-speaking world never went away, the Commonwealth could not provide a viable alternative to Europe in the mid-1970s. But this context changed. As such, Eurosceptics in Britain have questioned Britain's accession to the Common Market.

Writing from Melbourne in 2013, Boris Johnson spoke of the 'historic and strategic decision that this country took in 1973' in which 'we betrayed our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand'. This betrayal was the product of specific historical circumstances – domestic, European and global – that no longer pertained. Johnson [argued](#) that:

When Britain joined the Common Market, it was at a time when the establishment was defeatist, declinist and obsessed with the idea that we were being left out of the most powerful economic club in the world. In those days – when olive oil and garlic had barely appeared on the dining tables of Britain – it was assumed that in order to be “internationalist” it was enough to be European. Well, it is now perfectly obvious that that is no longer enough – and that we need to seek a wider destiny for our country.

The attraction of such arguments was that they appeared to make historic and cultural sense. The Anglosphere suggested that progress could be reconciled with the restitution of a historical wrong and a future for Britain outside the EU imagined amongst a community of English-speaking peoples sanctioned by the past relationships and shared culture. Thus a political choice that seemed expansive in 1973 was perceived as parochial forty years later.

A renewed emphasis on long-standing and stable (if somewhat taken-for-granted) political relations with Commonwealth countries chimed with calls for a political re-orientation away from Europe after 2010. For example, speaking in Sydney only days before David Cameron's Bloomberg speech on the EU in London, William Hague argued for closer political cooperation between Britain and Australia, exemplified by the on-going 'five eyes' intelligence cooperation, the regular ministerial-level meetings inaugurated in 2006 under the name of [AUKMIN](#) and the diplomatic and consular cooperation in emerging countries that were already well established.

European Integration and the Anglo-British Past

The strong sense of British difference from the continent that animated many Eurosceptics and Anglosphere enthusiasts was firmly rooted in a particular understanding of Britain's past, making the Anglosphere the other side of the Eurosceptic coin. John Redwood neatly encapsulated the centrality of this history to hard Eurosceptic thought:

Britain is at peace with its past in a way that many continental countries could never be... We do not have to live

down the shame that many French people feel regarding the events of 1940-44. We do not have to live...with the collective guilt that Germany feels about the Holocaust... We do not wake up every morning like Italians to wonder who might be in government today and which government ministers might be charged with corruption tomorrow.

Such a rendering of the past is redolent of the dominant British historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which uncritically celebrated Britain's constitutional and imperial achievements and the collective exceptionalism of the English-speaking peoples to be found in David Cameron's 'favourite book,' *Our Island Story*, by Henrietta Marshall.

In this understanding of the past, the unique British inheritance that makes further integration into Europe undesirable to hard Eurosceptics is the very same inheritance that unites the Anglophone world, rendering deeper cooperation and closer association not only eminently possible but highly desirable. In this way, with the 'Special Relationship' at its core, the Anglosphere's proponents contend it would constitute a more authentic and robust standard-bearer for Western values than a weak and crisis-ridden EU could ever hope to be.

Conclusion

Even advocates of the Anglosphere Association are happy for it to remain just an idea: a gratifyingly provocative retort to the likes of Tristan Garel Jones. An institutionalised Anglosphere Association is unlikely to be realised anytime soon. But the practicalities and prospects of the Anglosphere as a functional entity are not really the main point of interest here. Anglosphere enthusiasm is significant first and foremost for what it says about a certain strand of hard British Euroscepticism and its conception of Britain's identity and place in the world.

Note: This blog is based on the article 'Euroscepticism and the Anglosphere: traditions and dilemmas in contemporary English nationalism' in Journal of Common Market Studies, 52, 1, 2015: 123-39. It gives the views of the author, and not the position of BrexitVote, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Public Domain

About the authors:

Ben Wellings is Lecturer in European Studies at Monash University. He is the author of *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: losing the peace* (Peter Lang, 2012).



Helen Baxendale is completing an MPhil in Comparative Social Policy at the University of Oxford, supported by a Rhodes Scholarship. Prior to this she studied politics and modern history at the Australian National University.



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