

The restoration of a 'lost' Britain: how nostalgia becomes a dangerous political force



*For many Britons, everything was better in the past. **Sophia Gaston** writes that this is partly because governments have not always been successful at guiding citizens through times of social and economic change. She examines nostalgia as a political force in Britain and explains why politicians must address, rather than avoid questions about patriotism and identity.*

The study of nostalgia inevitably creates a rather bleak historical record of the present. While warm reflections on the past are a natural human inclination, it is an acute dissatisfaction with the current status quo, coupled with a vivid fear of the future, which together compel the desire to restore the social and economic conditions of the past.

With 63% of Britons [believing that the country is in a state of decline](#), it is here that nostalgia can become a more dangerous political force, and a more urgent phenomenon to study. Not only because it reveals that citizens perceive the nation to be 'broken' in some fundamental way, but because the remedy in which they find comfort and recourse from these problems is not the hope of transformative change, but the restoration of a lost society. In effect, the propensity to believe in the 'doctrine of progress' has evaporated.

The processes that have led citizens to feel that Britain has lost its way have been slow to develop, but their consequences now feel unwieldy and irrepressible. While Britons' level of trust in business, politics, and the media has been worryingly anaemic for some time, what is special about this moment is the success of political campaigns harnessing this fertile ground of dissatisfaction to sell the past as the best model for the future.

The shock inspired by the sight of advanced democracies turning away from the orthodoxy of capitalist liberalism and veering towards nativism and protectionism has necessarily triggered alarm bells throughout the West. While nostalgia has always held a foot in British politics, our contemporary elections risk descending into a battle between competing nostalgic visions.

Exasperated column inches have struggled to make sense of this most profoundly emotional force seemingly corrupting politics and intoxicating society. The Right condemns the fantastical delusions of re-nationalisation and the Left decries a bigoted, misogynistic vision of a 1950s fairy tale, and neither's disdain convinces the other to turn towards their kind of progress. If we accept that nostalgia stands as a symptom of a contemporary malaise, dismissing its expressions becomes a self-destructive game, shielding ourselves to the causes in which lie its potential responses.

When we give citizens the opportunity to explain the myriad factors that have shaped their own opinions, it becomes difficult to dismiss the pull of the past as entirely feeble nor irrational. 71% of Britons believe their communities have declined over the course of their lifetimes, and 55% think that job opportunities have shrunk. We must accept that even in our dynamic, prosperous, innovative nation, there are citizens who have experienced some genuine sense of material loss – of security, of prospects, of status, of representation.



Governments have not always been successful at guiding citizens through times of change, and every new economic and social transformation has spawned winners and losers. For our societies to function, citizens need to be open to change, but they also need to be supported along the way.

It is certainly true that many other citizens also susceptible to nostalgic messages do not live in forgotten de-industrialised towns; perhaps, they are even relatively economically secure. They speak of the cumulative 'stress' of constant adaptation to evolving social norms, and of a political environment that prioritises 'the issue of the day' over long-held values. Where every advancement of social liberalism is not rewarded with rest and contentment, but rather spawns new campaigns to overthrow yet another set of norms.

For these citizens, the evolving mores of political correctness, the 'ideology' of multiculturalism, and the ensuing softening of nationalism have been immensely confusing. As the rights and standing of minority groups has risen, it has felt as though their own stake has eroded. For those who have benefited from or welcomed the 'opening' and diversification of our societies, it can be difficult to imagine this liberal age as time of loss. But for many citizens, the national story, the bulwarks from which they have drawn pride and safety, have become less prominent and, they perceive, less favoured.

These anxieties, while less material, are by no means less consequential. If the deep scars of de-industrialisation reflect failures of public policy, then the widespread cultural and social insecurities of citizens synthesise a capitulation of political leadership: 55% of citizens believe the government has not done enough to promote traditional British values.

The national story politicians have tried to weave during a time of immense change has been exposed as febrile – insufficiently robust, mobilising, and securitising. These fundamental questions, about pride, patriotism, and identity in an age where community is no longer defined by the physical proximity but by the proximity of the mind's shared values, have not been answered. Unless politicians can forge a convincing new narrative for citizens to draw strength from, they will lose the mandate to compel Britain into the future.

The above draws on the [author's paper](#) (with Sacha Hilhorst) for Demos. This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. It first appeared on [LSE British Politics and Policy](#). Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#) (Public Domain).

Sophia Gaston ([@sophgaston](#)) is a social and political researcher.