Brexit: A Colonial Boomerang in a Populist World

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Editorial: Social justice campaigns for civility even in the face of the most challenging times, brought about by the events such as the Easter Sunday atrocities in Sri Lanka.

Paul Weller: Colonialism and imperialism finally had their 'blowback effects', with fragmented, embattled and embittered fabric of what is left of the now deeply (dis) 'United' Kingdom.

Upul Kumarapperuma: This single act of political irresponsibility is what the public abhors most annoyingly and is silly to say that 'I did not know'.

Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi: No single perspective, ideology, political or religious would be sufficient to resolve and transform complex human situations.

Andi Schubert: Electing more educated politicians does not address the problems arising from an exclusive and elitist political system that cannot deal with the extremist agenda of ethnic or religious nature.
I am writing from a corner of the world where what is happening may or may not seem to people in other parts of the world to be of any particular importance compared with the global challenges of poverty, war, proxy wars and violence especially what happened on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, climate change; or indeed, to be linked in any significant way with their own historical or contemporary national or political contexts. However, I want to argue that there are important connections between what is happening in the biggest social and political crisis of my lifetime in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), and matters with which friends and colleagues in the Two Thirds World have long experience of dealing with even after the colonial project.
Ireland (UK), and matters with which friends and colleagues in the Two Thirds World have long experience of dealing with, as the UK Government, Parliament and people wrestle with one other over the implications arising from the narrow June 2016 UK Referendum result of 51.89%-48.11% (of those voting) in favour of leaving the European Union (EU), now known as “Brexit”.

Events surrounding Brexit are so fast moving that, within a week from the submission of this article, the UK could be outside the EU without a legal framework for withdrawal. Equally, faced with such a scenario, the UK Parliament may accept the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Statement on future relations negotiated between the UK Government and the EU. But also, the UK may ask the EU for a long extension of the period of notice (known as Article 50) that a member state must give when intending to leave the EU, and during which either a General Election might take place, or another Referendum.

**Historical and Analytical Roots**

What is at the “root” of the social and political turmoil surrounding Brexit? And how does this relate to the “roots” of other conflicts in the wider Europe, and also to broader global conflicts, issues and structures? During the 2016 EU Referendum debates, the theme of “take back control” was deployed as a powerfully seductive slogan suggestive of apparently simple problems and solutions. First, it sought to provide an explanation for the sense among the socially and economically “left behind”, that since the financial crash of 2017-18, they had been the victims of powerful global forces. Second, it was deployed in relation to the migration to the UK of relatively large numbers of people, particularly from the new (2004) EU accession states of Poland and Romania, which had resulted in rapid and extensive changes to aspects of a previously more familiar social and cultural fabric.

Seen in terms of domestic politics, “Brexit” came about through a Referendum called by the former Conservative Party Prime Minister, David Cameron trying (unsuccessfully) to try and outflank the growing electoral threat of the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party. But a central argument of this paper is that a more serious understanding of the “roots” of the crisis of “Brexit” requires an analytical engagement with the cross-currents that swirl between the global imperial and colonial inheritance of an Empire that, by 1920 (even after the loss of the former colonies in what became the independent United States of America) covered 24% of the world’s landmass, and some of the key trends and issues arising from the highly varied, ambiguous, but also irresistible contemporary forces of globalisation resulting from what the British historian Arnold Toynbee called “the annihilation of distance”.

‘Brexit’ has shaken up political configurations and complacency about what English politicians for too long have tended to refer to in an unconsciously culturally and politically assimilationist way as “the nation” when, as a matter of both historical fact and contemporary reality, the present UK state is a specific configuration of nations within a single state that was created as part of an overall “internal” trajectory of a colonial and imperial enterprise that was then rolled out into the wider world by the “Great Britain” that was created (following the 1284 conquest and annexation of Wales by the English Crown) from the 1706-7 union of the previously separate Kingdoms of England and Scotland, and then the later (1800) union of “Great Britain” and “Ireland” into what eventually became the “Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland” at the heart of the British Empire. But if this analysis is accepted, then it is not surprising that issues relating both to Scotland and to Northern Ireland have been playing a very big role in the present Brexit crisis.

**Scottish Factor**

In Scotland, 62% of those voting voted to remain in the EU and only 38% to leave although, ironically, in the 2014 Scottish independence Referendum, it had been argued by the UK Government that leaving the UK would put Scotland’s EU membership at risk. Prior to the EU Referendum, the First Minister of Scotland had argued that Referendum results should only be implemented if there were majorities in all four countries of the UK. In Northern Ireland, 55.8% of those voting voted to remain and 44.2% to leave. In the island of Ireland as a whole, ongoing conflicts go back to an English Crown and (later) Parliament, and still later British and imperial state, that never fully conquered Irish resistance despite brutal military subjugation; a process of “internal” colonisation; an external “settlement” into Ireland; and, finally, the impact of Government economic policies in the wake of a potato blight and that issued into the Great Famine of 1845-1849, during which around a million people died and a further million emigrated.

**Irish Context**

Irish resistance and growing Irish aspirations for independence eventually led to the partition of the island of Ireland between the 1922 foundation of the Irish Free State (now the fully independent Republic of Ireland) and the province of Northern Ireland which has remained a part of what, in 1927, was renamed as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That partition initially resulted in a civil war in
There is also the paradigmatic example of Donald Trump and “Trumpism” in the USA, with its projects to exclude travellers from a range of countries having predominantly Muslim populations, and by the building of a wall to deter migrants and asylum-seekers from Central and Latin America.

The South while, later, in the North, and following the violent suppression of the Civil Rights movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s, an ensuing “low intensity” state of war embroiled Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in around three decades during which around 3,500 people were killed (of whom 52% were civilians; 32% members of the British security forces; and 16% members of paramilitary groups). This continued until the 1998 Good Friday or (more formally) Belfast Agreement which ushered in an important, albeit fragile, triumph of civility over civil conflict, in which the militarised infrastructures on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic were dismantled, and the free movement of trade and of people between the Republic and Northern Ireland was facilitated in the context of shared membership of the Single Market of the EU, to which both the UK and the Republic of Ireland belonged.

From Roots to 'Re-routing'?

Such common belonging within the supranational structure of the EU having brought about a relativisation of the previous national tensions and conflicts in these islands, any exit of the UK from the EU is likely to reactivate and further inflame those tensions and conflicts. And a critically important things emerging from the Brexit crisis is that the current forms of the inter-relationships between the component parts of the UK are no longer fit for purpose. Thus, if the UK is to continue at all - whether on its own outside the EU; in some form of association with the EU; or even if ultimately still within the EU, then a reconfiguration of the current UK state into new kinds of interconnections that are more properly reflective of these nations’ and islands’ shared (if sometimes conflictual) histories, identities, cultures and economies is needed.

Civility Challenged

In the meantime, the wider Europe has been the context for a project of increasing economic, monetary, legal, political and social integration within the EU. But concurrently, and especially during the substantial flows, in 2014-16, of refugees and migrants from Syria and Africa trying to reach Europe, this same Europe saw a growth in political movements that have sought to prevent and/or roll back what has become the continent’s increasing ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism. In this context, the Mediterranean sea has, tragically, become a graveyard for many seeking to reach Europe, with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimating 2,275 deaths in 2018, which is 1 death for every 51 arrivals. Thus although the EU has been a unique social, economic and peace project within an otherwise often destructive European history, it is a far from perfect political formation.

Not only have new asylum seekers and refugees often been dealt with in ways contrary to its articulated values, but within many EU countries, existing minorities have come under increasing pressure from (what are predominantly right wing) national populist movements that are attempting to exclude “others” on religio-national grounds. Such movements have recently begun to move into state power - as with Victor Orbán’s Fidesz party that has been in power in Hungary for nearly a decade; and the Law and Justice Party in Poland, which came to power in 2015, and has recently ordered all new passports to include the words “God, Honour, Motherland”. And, in the upcoming European
Parliament elections, Orbán and others are seeking to form a new coalition of forces in defence of what they see as “Christian civilisation” and against what they see as an invasion of alien values, cultures, and people - most particularly in relation to Islam and Muslims.

Beyond Europe, there has been the recent Presidential election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro of Brazil. There is also the paradigmatic example of Donald Trump and “Trumpism” in the USA, with its projects to exclude ‘travellers’ from a range of countries having predominantly Muslim populations, and by the building of a wall to deter migrants and asylum-seekers from Central and Latin America. From within the majority Muslim world there has been the transmutation of the long standing populist rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development party (AKP) in Turkey into an increasingly authoritarian form of rule in which thousands of ordinary religious believers, civil servants, and journalists have been imprisoned and/or condemned to a kind of “social cleansing” and, which, with justification, might be seen as an ongoing coup against civil society.

Practical Wisdom and Political Courage

Thus in the UK; the EU; and the wider world beyond, our “time” is no longer an ordinary one, but rather that we are living in what can be called a “kairos” - meaning, as in the original New Testament Greek language - a time of decision that is pregnant with both dangers and opportunities. In this “kairos” time, for Christians and other people of faith, as well as for all those of goodwill, we might ask where are the religious and/or political leaders (the Martin Luther Kings, or the Mahatma Gandhis) who have the intellectual clarity; the political incisiveness; and the practical wisdom to rise to the challenges of identifying the roots of such a “kairos”, without prematurely being seduced into calls for “peace, peace, where there is no peace”, and who might help us to chart some possible ways forward? Whatever else, the UK’s Referendum on membership of the EU has shaken up a culture of political complacency and from that the question comes into focus of whether in and through the current deep fractures revealed in UK, the EU and global body politic, a recognition of the impossibility of political “business as usual” could yet be combined with the emergence of a new vision, courage and practical wisdom in which this “kairos” could yet become an opportunity to seize the possibility of creating something better than what has so far been?

Mutual Help in our Fragile World

As the historic and continuing significance and effects of the phenomena of colonialism and imperialism finally boomeranged into the fragmented, embattled and embittered fabric of what is left of the now deeply (dis) “United” Kingdom, it is likely that those of us who live and work there will need to call in aid against our temptation to despair, the analytical, spiritual and practical resources that sisters and brothers from the ‘Two Thirds world’ who have developed over several centuries of understanding the destructive phenomena of colonialism and imperialism, and of identifying some possible ways to overcome them which might thereby yet be able to help Brits in our own search for justice and peace within the common fragile and interdependent world in which we all live.