Haut du formulaire

**Britain after the referendum Another country, not my own** Jun 28th 2016, by Buttonwood

GROWING up a British, and specifically an English person, is bound to have some effect on one’s personality. Just supporting the national sports team induces a sense of perpetual disappointment, as the [recent loss to Iceland](http://www.economist.com/blogs/gametheory/2016/06/2016-euros) has illustrated. There is a trait of self-deprecation, which Americans sometimes struggle to understand, and which masks a (probably unjustified) pride in our national sense of humour.

History also plays its part. Britons have benefited from a global version of the QWERTY syndrome; our ancestors defeated the French in the battle for European control of North America. Not only did this establish English as the global language, but the natural alliance with America helped Britain win two world wars. The use of English and the country’s geographical position has made Britain a natural base for international business and finance. By being on the “right side” of those wars, English people grow up with a fairly benign view of their role in history and are shocked to find that the Irish (let alone the Scots) and citizens of the countries we invaded have a much more jaundiced impression. In a sense, then, modern Britons were “born on third base and think they hit a triple.”

It was not always thus. Just 40 years ago, Britain was a mess. As a teenager I recall doing homework by candlelight in the power cuts of 1972, the three-day week, endless strikes and a widespread sense that Britain was ungovernable. It was a shabby, dirty country; when my mum hung out the washing in Peterborough, the soot from the brick chimneys made it dirty again. There was widespread racism; “Paki-bashing” was a favourite sport of teenage boys. In the late 1970s, more people were leaving Britain than immigrating; London’s population [fell by a quarter between 1939 and the early 1990s](http://www.citymetric.com/skylines/week-when-londons-population-will-finally-overtake-its-previous-peak-606).

Slowly but surely, Britain changed. Was it the EU? Was it Margaret Thatcher’s reforms? Was it North Sea oil (another lucky break)? Whatever the reason, Britain became more confident, more vibrant, more multicultural. To return to the trivial subject of sport, in the 1972 Olympics Britain won just four gold medals, three of which came in the “posh” disciplines of sailing and horse riding. In 2012, we won 29, with the magnificent Mo Farah, a Somali immigrant as a child, taking two to the adoration of a packed London stadium. In football, a black England player was once a news item; now they make up half the team on a regular basis.

The British economy was no longer the “sick man of Europe”, especially in the run-up to 2008. Yes, there was too much debt and too big a bet on financial services; but these were not the only areas where Britain was doing well. The car industry has been revived under foreign ownership; aerospace remains important, as does pharmaceuticals; and Hollywood calls on Britain’s creative and technical expertise. The sense of national decline had gone; people flocked to live and work in London as one of the world’s great cities.

Not everybody, of course, welcomed these changes. And I understand that it is easier for a middle-class Briton to feel more secure about it than for someone on the minimum wage. Workers in the developed world felt that the benefits of globalisation were passing them by. Still, Britain has had rather more success, post-2008, in driving down its unemployment rate than France, Spain or Italy.

It also felt like there was a cultural change towards greater tolerance; British football supporters are nowadays horrified by the racism they hear expressed towards their players in eastern Europe. The British National Party imploded in the face of a lack of voter support.

Now in the space of a week, there is a sense that all that has changed. The referendum campaign seems to have awakened some “rough beast” within the British public; never mind a halt to immigration, some people think existing immigrants are about to be forced out. There are [widespread reports](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/26/racist-incidents-feared-to-be-linked-to-brexit-result-reported-in-england-and-wales) of racist incidents and attacks.

Yes, of course, the 17m people who voted Leave did so for a wide variety of reasons, from sovereignty through to the hope that more money would be spent on the NHS. The Leave campaign was always an odd coalition between slightly eccentric back-bench Tories (who were also [climate-change sceptic](http://www.economist.com/blogs/buttonwood/2016/03/economics-and-politics)s) and UKIP’s nativist instincts. Part of the reason for the post-referendum chaos is that there was no coherent plan for what a post-Brexit Britain would look like. But it is not clear that there is an electoral majority for the "Singapore of Europe" model that Michael Gove seems to support; Boris Johnson has quickly retreated from his assertion that the result was not about immigration.

To this lifelong resident, the country looks more like the Britain I remember from the 1970s and less the kind of country that I can feel proud about. And that matters because my children may soon lose the right to live and work in the rest of the EU, an insurance policy against nastiness at home. And if I feel that way, how many more talented, more mobile people, who came to Britain because it seemed like an open tolerant place, might decide to leave? And as they go, the [people in this video](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/manchester-tram-racist-attack-abuse-video-footage-get-back-to-africa-teenage-boys-abuse-suspects-a7107466.html) will feel like they have won.