



Bernard Porter

Balfour Declaration meant to move American Jews, thus bringing America to come into the War

Emeritus professor of modern history at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, and author of 'The Lion's Share: A History Of British Imperialism 1850 To The Present' (6th edition), published by Routledge in 2020.

■ ■ Let me begin with this: You said you moved to Stockholm to “escape” Brexit. What was so horrible with it that warranted an escape?

Not exactly ‘horrible’, and not Brexit alone; but the process, and the people who had, in my view, hi-jacked ‘Brexit’ in order to pursue what I think of as a very ‘un-British’ – and certainly illiberal - agenda of their own. I develop this case in my next book, out in June-July: ‘Britain’s Contested History: Lessons for Patriots’.

■ ■ It’s a curious fact that two decades into the 21st century, Britain has still managed to keep many geographically remote territories under its imperial rule despite immense global moves for independence in the 20th century, even though some argue that these territories are sovereign, democratic states in every respect other than name. Does the queen have a secret potion of sorts?! Humor aside, how important is that fact in itself?

The Queen is of no importance at all in this regard. And the phrase ‘imperial rule’ is a highly misleading way to describe nearly all these countries’ relationships with the UK today. Indeed, this could be said, to an extent, of Britain’s Empire even at its supposed height in the last two centuries. Again, this is argued – and I hope established – in the new book, and in a slightly older one: ‘British Imperial: What the Empire Wasn’t’.

■ ■ In its history, Britain maintained a formal and an informal empire. How should we understand the interrelatedness of these two projects?

There’s no particular interrelationship. ‘Informal’ empire sometimes became more ‘formal’, when the looser relationship didn’t work to Britain’s benefit. Then the resultant annexation was often regretted by the British authorities. Hence the term ‘reluctant empire’. ‘Informal’ was always referred, as in America’s case.

■ ■ Despite being staunch allies, Britain and the US have had tortured historical episodes, which perhaps started with the US independence and culminated in the US taking over the Britain’s role after the Second World War, making an empire of its own. How should we understand their current relationship in light of those historical events?



Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip greet Barack and Michelle Obama at Buckingham Palace in 2011.

Complicated. American independence has little relevance to it now, except to sustain certain anti-British prejudices among some ordinary Americans. On the British side attitudes are scarcely affected at all by this, but more by current American policies, and – so far as Britain’s rulers are concerned – the feeling that, as English-speakers, Americans should be natural allies, in what is sometimes called the ‘Anglosphere’. On the political Right the USA is often taken as a model for Britain’s economy – ‘neoliberalism’. That may have been one of the forces lying beneath the support for ‘Brexit’. On the other side (usually the Left), America is disapproved of for a number of reasons, her extreme form of capitalism being one, and her gun culture another. The notion of a ‘special relationship’ between the two countries is generally derided, with Britain’s being seen as the USA’s pathetic lapdog. But America’s economic power – demonstrated during the Suez Crisis, when the (then) pro-Arab USA forced Britain’s withdrawal – has made it difficult for the latter to break free. Brexit, probably requiring Britain to come to trade arrangements on America’s terms, will exacerbate this one-sidedness. You could regard the USA as exerting ‘informal imperialism’ over the UK now.

■ ■ In regards to the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 and the British government which “committed itself as firmly to the Zionists,” you observe that it “could have been made only in wartime” because, among other things, “the government was so pressed and distracted as to be able to ignore or neglect its patent drawbacks and dangers.” What patent drawbacks and dangers do you mean?