

Reflections on ‘Dear England’

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

News that England had lost out to Italy 3-2 on penalties in the Euro championship final after finishing 1-1 after 90-odd minutes of regular playing time had left me feeling somewhat discordant. After all, as an Australian resident in the UK, I had no “skin in the game” of this particular game (and the ball is the wrong shape for me anyway...) and found that I actually wanted them to win.

For to peer behind the headlines and look at the makeup of this team – its diversity and willingness for individual members to take up progressive causes; whether it be Marcus Rashford’s campaign to keep free school meals intact during the summer holiday period[\[1\]](#); or Raheem Sterling and the entire England team ‘taking the knee’[\[2\]](#) (contra the stance of our UK Home Secretary Priti Patel, and this UK Government in general) gave me renewed hope that a bunch of guys who were anything but *prima donnas*, and often had difficult upbringings could provide a pointer for progressive politics in England.

In a UK media landscape that exhibits significant hostility to progressive causes, it is welcome that there are those who can use their public positions, as Gareth Southgate robustly did, to speak up for the powerless. And then that one can try and counter the current UK Government’s cheap stance on promoting identity politics targeted towards so-called ‘Red Wall’ voters. Efforts to show that these voters are not stereotypically socially conservative and even xenophobic and build the case for tolerance and inclusion in those areas where hate does show up should be welcome[\[3\]](#).

I still recall my ex-partner telling me of the war-time experiences of her father, a man originally from Stoke-on-Trent (as close the epicentre of so-called ‘Brexit-land’ as one could posit); who served as a medic in the Second World War and was part of the D-Day landings. He was one of the British forces who liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on the 15th April 1945. However, he would only ever comment of the experience afterwards that he “would never forget the smell”.

Indeed, it is difficult to describe the horror that greeted these servicemen, with thousands of corpses lying around unburied amidst the camp and some 60,000 malnourished people crowded together without any food or water or basic sanitation.[\[4\]](#) One can only imagine the trauma of experiencing these things for oneself (let alone having been incarcerated in a Nazi death camp for any length).

However, for me, the defining experience of the man’s character was A (ex-partner’s name withheld) recalling to me that her father once spent all night in a minefield, standing up with a wounded soldier in his arms and unable to move in the dark, lest he set off one of these munitions. When morning came, he discovered that the wounded soldier in his arms was one of *the enemy* – a German – but held on to him nonetheless.

When asked afterwards by his comrades whether he would have done the same had he known which side this wounded soldier was on, he simply replied “yes”. For the record, I don’t know how he would have voted in the Brexit referendum or what his views on the EU were; he died long before me and A got together.

However, I can’t imagine that he would have had any truck with the petty xenophobic nationalism and culture-wars politics that our current UK Government indulges in. He saw first-hand what such attitudes could lead to.

And much like Mr Southgate and his football team, I know that there is another England out there (which Joe Strummer of ‘The Clash’ – *Bard Terriblé* of progressive causes, would have endorsed[\[5\]](#)),

that speaks to our better instincts – one that abhors racism and prejudice; one that is open, looks after the vulnerable, embraces diversity and cares for social justice – both at home and abroad (something that a genuinely ‘global’ Britain would aspire to). To leave the final words to Mr Southgate:

“Unfortunately for those people that engage in that kind of behaviour, I have some bad news. You’re on the losing side. It’s clear to me that we are heading for a much more tolerant and understanding society, and I know our lads will be a big part of that.” [6]

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-54717525>

[2] <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/raheem-sterling-england-gareth-southgate-romania-austria-b1861952.html>

[3] Obtaining reliable data on hate crime is surprisingly difficult – if we take the Crime Survey for England and Wales, it estimates 190,000 offences in the period 2017/18-2019/20 and that this is a slight increase on the 184,000 recorded over 2015/16-2017/18. For these, hate crime (of the limited type recorded in the Crime Survey for England and Wales) has held broadly constant at around 3% of all crimes recorded in the survey. However, both numbers are likely to be substantial underestimates, but it does appear that the trend of improvement has levelled off since the 2016 referendum. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2019-to-2020>

[4] <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen>

[5] See ‘This is England’.. at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2risJczFhN8>

[6] <https://www.thoplayertribune.com/posts/dear-england-gareth-southgate-euros-soccer>