

You CAN('t)ZUK be serious!

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

With apologies to tennis ace and *enfant terrible*, John McEnroe for paraphrasing his trademark exclamation when frustrated with umpiring decisions on court, today I thought I would look at the notion that the UK exiting the EU would somehow pave the way for that foremost of aspirations amongst a particular breed of Anglophone right-wing fantasist (e.g. those in the Adam Smith Institute or the Bruges Group) – that of the creation of the “Anglosphere”.

There have always been those who have gazed over the Atlantic and waxed lyrical over the supposed shared bond of the “English speaking peoples” – a term most notably used by Sir Winston Churchill in penning the titles of his historical *magnus opus* collected volume of books.^[1] However, today such longings are perhaps best associated with the advocates of “CANZUK” – a trade bloc, or federation even, of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

Now reader, as an Australian by birth with a Dutch surname, I am always somewhat bemused by concepts such as the “Anglosphere”. At its most basic interpretation it might be construed as being a cultural-linguistic geopolitical zone where English is the official language, or *lingua franca* at least. This could then be construed to cover all of the former British Empire and the United States.

However, in the hands of its exponents, for example, that of conservative historian Andrew Roberts, here writing in the Murdoch-owned Wall Street Journal^[2], the term has a much narrower coverage – that of (majority) *white* English-speaking countries, and moreover that the inhabitants of said countries are “British” by extraction (or at least preponderantly so). Of course for Roberts to claim that CANZUK would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the US as a “superpower” (having a combined population of 130 million c.f. the EU with 450 million) is laughable, but so it goes.

To this definition may be added a supposed related set of cultural characteristics that distinguish the so-called Anglo-Saxon countries from continental Europe in particular – namely, a love of liberty,

rugged individualism, and free enterprise that somehow makes them more innately democratic than statist Europeans (typified by French *dirigisme* for example); and that the freedom-loving Anglo-Saxons had to save the Europeans from their own innate totalitarian tendencies.

As such, we can be sure that the annual commemorations around VE Day will never cease (in contrast to say, that of the Napoleonic wars), as the Second World War is held to be the epitome of the triumph of the values of the Anglosphere. For these are sacrosanct to large sections of the elites of the UK and US etc. and will persist so long as they exert a disproportionate pull over the views of those who identify themselves as conservative in (majority) white, English-speaking countries.

Of course, it should go without saying that these narratives are no more than palpable nonsense. The Second World War was won in Europe not by the triumph of Anglo-Saxon democratic values but rather for the most part by the manpower of an equally repulsive totalitarian regime in the form of the Soviet Union, that under Stalin vied with Nazism in its propensity for repression and murder.

But, to come back to my point about having a Dutch surname, one has to ask, just who are the “English speaking peoples”? Are they British? It always struck me that in a previous relationship of mine in this country, my ex-partner’s mother insisted that I was “British”, despite being told by her daughter that I was Australian, and had a Dutch surname. Funny how I would seem less foreign to an “English” senior citizen in Birmingham, than my partner now, who is Scottish.

I see myself as Australian – but not British, either by residency or ancestry (my parents were born in the Netherlands, but my children all hold UK passports, so who knows how they will identify themselves going forward as they grow up, given the increasing prospects of Scottish independence and all that, but that’s another story), though having lived here now for 20 years-plus I clearly have an affinity for the UK.

So, let’s pick apart the “Anglosphere” by perceived ethnicity. The largest white ethnic group in the United States is German, numbering some 50 million (or 16% of the population; at least to the extent that

nationality is identified by the largest number of Americans as their ancestry, either in total or in part).[\[3\]](#)

Similarly, in 2016, only 32.5% of Canadians saw themselves in part or in whole as having ancestry from the UK or Ireland.[\[4\]](#) Similarly, only 36.1% of Australians during the 2016 Census, identified themselves as having English ancestry in total or in part.[\[5\]](#) For obvious historical reasons, people of Irish extraction, such as current US President Joe Biden, do not see themselves as British, in any sense of the word.

What this suggests to me is that however convenient citizens of these countries have found having access to the UK and being in a semi-familiar environment pinned on a shared language, at the end of the day, the convenience of the UK was that it served as a bridge to (mainland) Europe. With Brexit, that appeal has largely been blown out of the water.

For Americans, Canadians and Australians, their national identity and sympathies are more rooted in where they grew up (witness the significant chunk of those in the US who only self-identify as “American”), than by any purported ties of language and colonial history.

So whilst Canada “likes” the UK, it also similarly “likes” France and Germany but is more ambivalent towards the US. Similarly, whilst British opinion favours immigration and free trade agreements with Canada and Australia, similar levels of support are expressed amongst the UK public towards the EU[\[6\]](#) – hardly a ringing endorsement for closer economic union under the premise of the Anglosphere...

Moreover, the fact that a majority of those in the US, Canada and Australia are non-British by ancestry says that there is no special affection or affinity for the UK and therefore no particular longing for any kind of closer association with the UK beyond that of a free trade agreement that might allow freedom of movement. To revert to my Aussie-speak, it’s just business mate. And to come back to Mr. McEnroe, when it comes to “CANZUK”, you can’t be serious...

[1] See ‘*The English-Speaking Peoples Before Churchill*’ by Peter Clarke, for a critical appraisal of Churchill’s writings on the subject here

at <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/brw.2011.0023> .

[2] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/its-time-to-revive-the-anglosphere-11596859260>

[3] Indeed, only in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Utah do we see “English” identified as the largest proportion of ancestry for the most part by county in the US. See <https://blogs.voanews.com/all-about-america/2014/12/19/people-of-german-ancestry-dominate-us-melting-pot/>

[4] <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016016/98-200-x2016016-eng.cfm?wbdisable=true>

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Australians

[6] <https://canzuknet.wordpress.com/canzuk-related-polls/>