

Australian MPs push CANZUK British Empire reboot

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott has been appointed to a leading position at the British Board of Trade to help the UK secure a free trade deal with Australia. The British plan, however, is far more than a trade deal.

For some time the British establishment, from selected MPs to media and think tanks, has been pushing for a new “Anglosphere” bloc of nations. This would begin with CANZUK—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK—and would expand to include the entire Commonwealth of Nations, in alliance with other English-speaking nations starting with the USA. Propelled by the “Global Britain” vision for a post-Brexit UK (article below), the plan encompasses worldwide economic and military expansion, primarily targeted at hampering China’s growing influence.

Aussie MPs

As a long-time missionary for free trade, Abbott is a fitting choice for the job. In December 2016 he wrote the introduction to a paper by a Conservative British think tank dedicated to saving the maligned reputation of liberal economics, the Free Enterprise Group, titled “Reconnecting with the Commonwealth: the UK’s Free Trade



Britain’s new trade representative, Tony Abbott. Photo: AFP/Justin Tallis

Opportunities”. Abbott called for an “absolutely free” trade agreement between Australia and the UK, declaring: “Brexit means that Britain is back. The country that gave the world the English language, common law and the Mother of Parliaments is once more to seize its destiny as a global leader. ... Of course, no two countries are more like-minded than Britain and Australia. We have a language, a set of values and a large slab of history in common.”

Other Liberal MPs have helped propel this project. In February 2018 former Foreign Minister and High Commissioner to the UK Alexander Downer wrote the foreword to a paper by the right-wing think tank Policy Exchange, headlined “Global Champion: The case for unilateral free trade”. The report called for the “unilateral elimination of all our remaining tariffs”, making post-Brexit Britain “a global champion for free trade”.

Current High Commissioner to the UK and former Attorney-General George Brandis told the BBC upon the launch of a 2019 Henry Jackson Society report on “Global Britain”, discussed below, that “Britain’s desire to adopt a global posture is to be welcomed”. He noted the integration between Australian and British intelligence agencies and militaries, and welcomed Britain’s move to increase its diplomatic and military presence in the Pacific region.

In June, Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg led the establishment of an economic coalition within the Five Eyes intelligence alliance. (“Don’t leave Australia’s economic future up to spies!”, AAS, 24 June.) Five Eyes comprises the CANZUK nations plus the USA. Besides Australia, New Zealand and Canada are also currently negotiating free trade agreements with the UK. A CANZUK alliance has been supported by former New Zealand National Party leader Simon Bridges, is the official policy of the Canadian Conservative Party, and has been blessed by UK PM Boris Johnson.

The entry of yet another Australian Liberal MP into the debate, Victorian Senator James Paterson, a member of Parliament’s “Wolverines” who claim to defend Australia’s sovereignty, sheds more light on the geopolitical strategy of the new bloc. On 19 August Paterson authored a paper published by the British neoliberal think tank the Adam Smith Institute, titled [“A Ripper Deal: The case for free trade and movement between Australia and the United Kingdom”](#).

CANZUK—a new British Empire

Paterson opens his paper by declaring: “This is a pivotal time in Britain’s history.” The UK, he continued, can re-define its role as a “global champion of free trade and defender of the rules-based international order”, adding that “Australia will welcome the return of a global Britain.” Echoing Abbott’s earlier contribution to the Free Enterprise Group, he talked about shared historical, cultural and legal ties which provide “the foundation for an ambitious wider CANZUK agreement”.

The envisioned UK-Australia agreement, which would provide the basis of a future CANZUK framework, would be modelled on Australia-New Zealand relations, wrote Paterson, as established by the Closer Economic Relations (CER) agreement. For a proclaimed defender of “sovereignty”, it is curious that

Paterson is advocating deep integration with multiple countries, including removal of tariff barriers; greater economic integration; visa free travel; provision to allow citizens to live and work in both countries (a “bilateral Free labour Mobility Zone” as proposed by Boris Johnson in 2013) and relaxation of immigration restrictions. Standards, certifications, regulations and qualifications of one nation would be accepted by the others.

Reminding readers that the UK was ranked by the Henry Jackson Society as “one of very few genuinely global powers with reach into every region and continent”; that “the City of London is one of the world’s most important financial centres”; and drawing attention to the Five Eyes family and common head of state shared by CANZUK, Paterson added: “the economic relationships Australia has with countries like China—it’s largest trading partner—will never compare to the deep and enduring bonds it shares with like-minded countries like the UK; as well as Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.” Paterson doesn’t mention the obvious, that these are all former colonies of the British Empire.

An earlier report, published in February 2019 by the Henry Jackson Society, “[Global Britain: A twenty-first century vision](#)”, drew on similar themes. It pushed for a free trade and free movement zone between the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, “a natural alliance” united by shared values and interests.

The report focused on Three Freedoms—free trade, freedom from oppression, and freedom of thought, supposedly inspired by British history. Global Britain—an initiative to revive Britain’s global empire of trade, military and intelligence alliances—is justified by rising “authoritarian states” trying to change or undermine the international order, namely China and Russia. Amid a list of policy recommendations including increased military spending and using the BBC World Service for outreach, the report suggested: “The UK should deepen ties with Canada, New Zealand and Australia in a new CANZUK alliance covering trade, defence, academia and research, and visa and travel agreements”.

The report also cited the Australia-New Zealand relationship, which boasts “the deepest and broadest free trade agreement in the world”, as a model for free movement and free trade between CANZUK nations. Military arrangements and diplomacy of the four nations should be integrated, said the report, and the UK should progressively coordinate its UN Security Council decisions with Australia, Canada and NZ, to potentially become an “integrated CANZUK seat within the next 25 years”. The UK should propose a joint standing Indo-Pacific fleet, with Australia and Canada providing the bulk of military vessels, and consider forming a mutual defence pact, akin to NATO. All of which should be extended across the Commonwealth over time.

All this talk of freedom of trade, movement and open cooperation with CANZUK occurs as the Australian government is desperately rushing to cut off cooperation with China with its proposed ban on state governments, universities and local councils conducting foreign deals (p. 6).

British historian Andrew Roberts, an enthusiastic supporter of Anglo-American military interventions such as the Iraq War, in a 10 August article for the *Wall Street Journal* (republished in the *Australian*) under the headline “Now is the time to revive the Anglosphere”, describes the proposed Commonwealth alliance as creating “a new global superpower and ally of the US, the great anchor of the Anglosphere”.

CANZUK dates back to the proposal for Imperial Federation in the early 20th century, but today a “revanchist China” provides the required impetus. CANZUK, he wrote, “would have a combined GDP of more than US\$8 trillion, placing it behind only the US, China and the EU”; a population over 135 million; and a combined defence expenditure of more than US\$140 billion. “The cost of curbing and containing China’s global ambitions”, Roberts concluded, “would become the historic role of not one but two superpowers”. Russia and China are lumped in with North Korea and Iran as threats the Anglosphere must face down, with support from nations such as Israel, India, South Africa, Poland and Japan.

Financial Empire

Tony Abbott has advised the UK to initiate new trade deals with Commonwealth nations ahead of all others. *The Sun* reported on 25 August that Abbott will be “part of a drive to get a number of global ‘friends’ to bang the drum from Brexit Britain”. CityAM, the organ of the City of London Corporation—the political body that exclusively represents London banks—reported 26 August that executives from big firms such as EY, Barclays and HSBC will join the government’s new trade advisory body. In a submission to a 2017 Australian parliamentary committee scoping out the future Australia-UK free trade agreement, HSBC, the bank forged in the crucible of Britain’s Opium Wars against China, revealed that “UK businesses can take advantage of Australia’s familiar legal, business and social systems to establish offices from which they can tap into China and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] consumer markets ... [and can] access Asian growth indirectly by investing in Australian assets with a high degree of exposure to Asian trade”. (“[HSBC minister pushes Trojan Horse trade agreement](#)”, AAS, 10 Oct. 2018)

The UK Department for International Trade’s website states: “Many UK businesses already view Australia as an attractive base for their regional operations, and Australia’s connections in Asia makes

[sic] it an excellent partner for the UK to launch into a region which stands to deliver nearly two thirds of global growth to 2030.”

In other words, even as the USA and UK antagonise China, the City is intent upon benefiting from China’s growth and maintaining the City’s domination of global finance. After the 2008 global financial crisis, with China the only source of growth, London quickly moved to monopolise Chinese currency (renminbi) financial flows. The City now hosts the second-largest offshore renminbi trading centre after Hong Kong. (“[The City of London’s China pivot](#)”, AAS, 11 July 2018.)

Britain’s eastward shift and global reincarnation preceded Brexit and even the Asia Pivot launched by US President Barack Obama in 2011. From the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, London’s premier think tank the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) was examining opportunities for Britain to expand its power, determining in 1995 that its economic future was in Asia, for which Australia would be a “jumping-off point”. (“[NATO invades the Pacific](#)”, AAS, 8 July.) This would consolidate Britain’s post-WWII transformation from old imperial control structures into an “informal financial empire”.

‘Global Britain’ and gunboats

The European Union was created at the initiative of the City of London, completing a transformation begun in the 1950s of the old British Empire into an “informal financial empire” (See “[How London’s Euromarket killed Bretton Woods](#)”, AAS, 19 Sept. 2018); but following Brexit and amid enormous geopolitical shifts, it’s back to the gunboats:

- Following the June Brexit vote, UK Prime Minister Theresa May declared on 2 November 2016: “As the UK prepares to leave the EU, I am determined that Britain should become the global champion of free trade”.
- In a July 2016 speech at Mansion House in the City of London, First Sea Lord (i.e. head of the Royal Navy) Admiral Sir Philip Jones stressed “Britain’s continuing, and indeed growing, position of global maritime leadership”, foreshadowing that the Royal Navy would again play a crucial role in supporting the UK’s prosperity, as it did “at the height of the Empire”.
- In a blog for the 16 November 2016 Huffington Post, British author Mark Curtis, a former analyst at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, wrote that Britain “is even threatening to increasingly use its global military power to secure its financial and economic interests”, adding that “This is a clear exposition of the return of imperial gunboat diplomacy that Britain may be envisaging in the post-Brexit world.”
- In an 11 February 2019 speech at defence and security think tank the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson cast a “resurgent” Russia and China as threats in “a world of spheres of influence and competing great powers”. In this new era the UK must not only talk but act, he said, as “a global power with truly global interests”, adding that “our armed forces represent the best of Global Britain in action”.
- Former British Chancellor George Osborne responded to Williamson’s remarks on BBC Radio 4: “You’ve got the defence secretary engaging in gunboat diplomacy of a quite old-fashioned kind, at the same time as the chancellor of the exchequer and the foreign secretary are going around saying they want a close economic partnership with China.”

By Elisa Barwick, Australian Alert Service, 2 September 2020