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# opinión

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## THE HEROIC FAILURE OF BRITISH LEADERS

**Francis Ghiles**, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

In Tinker Taylor Soldier Spy, John Le Carré offered an acute portrayal of the British establishment's experience of post-war decline – “Trained to empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. All taken away. Bye-bye world.” Nostalgia for the country's imperial past is the horror of finding the tables turned. As Fintan O'Toole noted in *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London, Head of Zeus, 2018), leaving the European Union is akin to an army retreating to the islands with the spoils, except that large parts of the island, not least Scotland, strongly disagree. One of the most remarkable things about Brexit is the imaginary oppression which underlies it.

Two weeks ago, during his state visit to London, the US president, Donald Trump, humiliated the British repeatedly, not least by tweeting gratuitous insults about the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan and a patronising attitude to the Prime Minister, Teresa May. When he launched his now failed bid for the Tory leadership last week, Dominic Raab stated “we've been humiliated as a country”. Observers might have concluded that this was a reaction to President Trump's insults but such was not the case. His barb was aimed at the European Union. To save national honour demands the country takes the pain of a no-deal Brexit.

Newspaper headlines speak of collective abasement – “Humiliating to have to beg” or “Brexit and the prospect of humiliation”, the list is endless. It takes the wit of an Irishman, from a country which has, over the centuries, endured much humiliation from the English to dissect the mind of the UK's upper middle class with a scalpel. One approach is psychological: not being an objective reality, “humiliation can only be calibrated against one's own sense of one's status”. How dare they treat us like this ask the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph, “they” of course being the EU, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. This hyped-up melodrama shows no sign of ending any time soon as one watches the contenders for the Tory crown, with the possible exception of Rory Stewart, acting out phoney feelings which do not allow them to recognise the real thing.

The Tory party, which has dominated British politics for well over one hundred years used to be a byword for moderate, incremental reform, a form of conservatism which recognised facts and was, on the whole, able to build a consensus. As one ballot of Tory members of parliament after another whittle the number of candidates down to two – at which point about 160,000 party members with an average age of 65 will have the final say, the British electorate and those abroad till

interested in this sorry saga, are the impotent onlookers of a horror show. Most of the candidates offer no serious answers to most questions, not least the key one: how on earth is the United Kingdom going to exit the EU without crashing out of it?

Self-pity combines two things: a deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority. Crude passionate nationalism has taken two antagonistic forms; one sets out to dominate the world, the other to throw off such domination. O'Toole points out that "the incoherence of the new English nationalism that lies behind Brexit is that it wants to be both simultaneously". He argues, rather provocatively that what was once used to demonize new arrivals from the Commonwealth was repurposed for use on migrants from Eastern Europe. Somehow, there is a fixed national quantum of xenophobia that must find an object if the United Kingdom is to find its integrity. Demonizing Brussels and the many western European professionals who make London especially the great international hub of finance and new ideas is fast reducing British prestige around the world and whatever role the country's ambassadors once had to nil.

Accepting that Britain today is an ordinary European country, that equality within the EU is a given is read by Brexiters as an unacceptable humiliation. But that is mere posture. To conflate, as Brexiters do a "European super state with a project of German domination of Europe, to pretend this as a stealthy way for the Germans to complete Hitler's unfinished" will carry devastating economic and political consequences for the United Kingdom, O'Toole warns. Britain entered the Common market in 1973, convinced it could dominate it and as compensation for the loss of empire but that did not work out. A psychological feature of the patrician class from which the next prime minister will no doubt be drawn is its fecklessness, a way to signify superiority over rule governed, bean-counting strivers of the bourgeoisie. Mistakes are laughed off and ignorance presented as a virtue: Boris Johnson presents a pitch perfect performance as an upper class toff who, like a spoilt child, wants to have his cake and eat it. Like the other candidates, he has tap-danced around the real question for most of the party members: can they secure something different from the deal with the EU negotiated by the outgoing prime minister? What would they do to secure it and, if so, would they really leave with no deal next October if not?

Maybe nothing of all this matters for a party which seems close to crack up. The overwhelming favourite to become prime minister spent years fictionalising from Brussels in his Daily Telegraph column, his talent for deceit is unmatched, his laziness in every office he has held proverbial. He never admits to changing his mind: what he believes at the moment is what he has always believed. The only safe prediction is that whoever wins the current contest will also – next October - face a major crisis of legitimacy.