

I am going to approach this topic from a very personal and contextual perspective. I will therefore focus more on 'belonging' than on 'Brexit', from the perspectives of the Caribbean, and indeed the Jamaican community.

I am Jamaican and a naturalised British citizen, but my reality, as is true for many of us, is more complex than that. When I was filling out the form for my shiny new U.K. passport, I was just about to put 'Jamaican' for my first nationality, when I remembered that the correct answer was 'British'. When I was born, my country was still a part of the 'empire on which the sun never set'.

We were educated to believe that we owed our loyalty to 'Mother England'. Even after we gained independence in 1962, we still struggled through British history. We were oriented to see world events from a British, or to be more precise, an English perspective. We read 'Biggles' and 'Billy Bunter' and I can still recite bits of Rudyard Kipling, some of which is actually quite subversive, by the by. And when we sang, 'Jerusalem' in church, you couldn't tell us that 'England's green and pleasant land' didn't belong to us.

And then we came over here. My uncle flew with the 'boys of the Royal Air force', while my aunties were nurses through the blitz. They did it for 'King and country', but for which country? They certainly thought it was this one. They expected to be treated like other British people, and sometimes they even were. Other times, well, they didn't dwell on that too much, or if they did, they laughed at the people who thought they lived in banana trees, or about the time they missed the allusion to 'spades' thinking the people were talking about shovels, when all the while it was about them.

They never complained. It was much later by reading novels such as Zadie Smith's 'Small Island' that I got some idea of how painful it must have been for them. In Jamaica we say that 'kin teet kibba heart bun', which can be translated 'Skinned teeth, or a grin, covers heartache'. It hurts to be excluded when you think you belong.

When the war was over, the military people mostly went home, but Britain badly needed workers, and we all know about the Windrush. But we need to remember that these people weren't coming to a foreign country to build their fortunes, they thought they were coming home to their 'Mother country'. They expected a welcome. They thought they belonged.

We will not now spend time on the churches that suggested that the Caribbean migrants who arrived clutching their confirmation certificates, would be more comfortable in 'the church down the road', even if none existed; and the Anglican-to-the-core West Indians who insisted that nothing would move them from their church. 'They don't like me here? Well, I come to worship God and not them.'

But what of the legalities? Were they mistaken, or did they really belong in the U.K.? Well, according to the 1948 British Nationality Act, they did. They were recognised as citizens of the United Kingdom and its colonies. However this Act was amended between 1962 and 1971 to impose greater restrictions on who could be termed British citizens, and who had the right to live and work in the U.K. It was eventually replaced by the British Nationality Act Of 1981. This now meant that being born a British subject of the former empire no longer gave you automatic British citizenship, and even being born in the U.K. did not necessarily convey this. Commonwealth citizens who were living in the U.K. before 1971 were offered indefinite leave to remain. Belonging had become more technical. The environment, never particularly friendly, was gradually becoming ever more hostile.

This did not stop the U.K. from aggressively recruiting nurses and teachers from those places which used to belong, but no longer did in the same way. This created somewhat of a moral dilemma for recruits from countries such as Jamaica, as their home government had invested heavily in their training in order to look after their own national interests, but could not afford to pay them enough to care for their families properly. So they came here and sent money home.

One may have thought that the moral dilemma of essentially accepting such a flow of trained human resources from poorer countries like Jamaica, effectively a subsidy from these countries, would have troubled the U.K. government. Maybe it did, but I am not aware of it. I do not recall any scheme to compensate countries like Jamaica for training U.K. staff. I do remember the slick cadres of British recruiters in packed auditoriums, setting out honeyed lures for Jamaican teachers.

One should not be overly surprised by this rather non-reciprocal relationship between the outposts of empire and its centre. If it reminds you of the parody of the children's ditty, 'for your food is my food and my food is my food ...the more we are together, the happier we shall be.' It is because that is how empire works. Other countries are conquered or annexed to make the central country richer.

This also applies when the client states of the former empire have been re-designated as a 'Commonwealth'. As some wag naughtily quipped, 'None of that wealth is held in common.' Benefits may accrue to other member states, but it is still thought of as the 'British' Commonwealth, designed to primarily benefit Britain, even though the name has changed.

And so to the E. U. When the U.K. struggled desperately to get into the European Economic Community, in the last century, continuously rejected by the wily Charles De Gaulle, until she finally got in in 1973, it is fairly safe to say that the welfare of the Commonwealth was not at the forefront of her considerations.

It is painful now to remember the efforts of the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states to navigate the tangles of the Lomé conventions I to IV, and the 'banana wars' with the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in order to negotiate survivable trade agreements. Some economies of former colonies did not do too well at all under the new regime of an EEC, and then EU Britain. And before blaming their governments for having inefficient systems, it is worth remembering that they did not go into the production of sugar cane or bananas or cocoa of their own accord, to make money for their own countries and people. They were set up, under the empire, as plantations to make money for British merchants and to build the British economy.

And that leads us to 'Brexit'. More than 40 years on from the so-called 'mother country' entering the EEC, Commonwealth countries have had to realign themselves and their trading relationships to match the changed circumstances. And Britain is choosing to once again change the playing field, with how much consultation with Commonwealth countries, one wonders. Some U.K. politicians have indeed begun to paint a rosy picture of re-engaging in enhanced trade with the Commonwealth, or at least some of the Commonwealth. Australia, New Zealand and Canada are apparently highly desirable, while the rest of us are suppliers of 'flag waving piccaninnies'.

Brexit was designed, we were told in the campaigns leading up to the referendum, to make Britain belong to the British people again. A leave vote would take back sovereignty from the 'faceless bureaucrats in Brussels'; take back control of British borders and British trade; take back control of laws and save £350 million per week. The Brexit campaign rhetoric seemed to suggest that somehow the ills of Britain came from outsiders somehow taking away British sovereignty.

The campaign appeared to resonate with, among others, working class people who already felt alienated and under pressure. The carefully constructed safety nets of the post-war period had been developing huge holes. Health, education and the social services were displaying major gaps, the need for food banks was increasing and people seemed to be faced with Dickensian poverty. Who better to blame than outsiders? The cynical among us might well believe that, in these trying times, the powerful who might actually bear responsibility for the situation were deliberately encouraging dissension between the 'British' working class, and the so-called 'foreigners', manipulating that the narrative to shift culpability from themselves to the outsiders.

How do we decide who counts as British? Cayman Islanders, who inhabit a British dependency, use the terms 'Belongers' and 'Non-belongers' to label people living and working on the islands. We in these islands have to decide on the essential criteria for our 'belongers' and 'non-belongers'. Is it birth? But what if you are undocumented, or are naturalised? Is it ethnicity? That would perhaps account for the seeming preference for Australians, if the intention were to welcome only some Australians, but not the antipathy to Romanians. Could it be religion? But census figures seem to indicate that most British people don't have one.

So who belongs here, really? Well we do. We multi-coloured, multi-religious, multi-cultured panorama of people. We claim our place here, not as barely tolerated visitors, but as family. We are here because we have contributed to the building of these lands, both here and when we were in our other homes. We are are fantastic because our labour builds two or three economies at the same time.

We are here because you decided you wanted to build an empire to make yourselves wealthy, but we are turning the tables on that one-sided arrangement. We are here to join with you to make a world where all can be empowered, where all can belong.