

As the imperial ties are being cast aside, a royal tour was always going to be a farce

It's not so much that William and Kate 'performed' badly on their Caribbean charm offensive. It's more that the show is out of date



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at a military passing out parade in Kingston, Jamaica, on 24 March 2022.

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Sovereignty, we are told, matters. It matters in Ukraine. It matters in Brexit. And, for some, the freedom afforded by sovereignty in the one instance is analogous to that afforded in the other.

Many of those who celebrate sovereignty against Russian invaders or EU impositions become silent, however, when Britain is the power denying the right of people to determine the future of their country. Last week, the British government amended the nationality and borders bill to allow Chagos Islanders to apply for British nationality. What the islanders want is not to be British but to have sovereignty over their own lands. To that, Britain remains obdurately opposed.

Between 1967 and 1973, Britain forcibly deported the entire population of the Chagos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, to make way for a US military base. Most of the exiled islanders now live in poverty and destitution. Britain's refusal to allow Chagossians to return to their homes has been deemed illegal by the international court of justice. But sovereignty, it seems, only matters in certain cases.

Sovereignty does not seem to matter when it comes to Britain's past any more than it does in the present

Sovereignty does not seem to matter when it comes to Britain's past any more than it does in the present. Last week, the equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch, demanded a "balanced" debate about the British empire. The "positives" must be taught as well as the "negatives" and "both sides of the story" must be told. Badenoch's argument is part of a long tradition of viewing the British empire as different from other empires, as essentially benign and which, despite the occasional excesses of violence, was largely positive for those who were colonised.

But what about sovereignty? What about the rights and views of those who were colonised? Sovereignty, apologists for empire argue, did not apply to the peoples Britain colonised, because they were "backward" and needed first to be brought into the modern world through British rule. As the icon of Victorian liberalism John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*: "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians provided that the end be their improvement."

It's a perspective that still finds adherents today. Nigel Biggar, a professor of theology at Oxford University and director of the Ethics and Empire project, insists that the British empire shows why it is wrong "to assume that domination is an intrinsically bad thing". Similarly, Bruce Gilley, an associate professor of political science at Portland State University in Oregon, has made "The Case for Colonialism", calling for the "abandonment of the myth of selfgoverning capacity".

Those who were subject to British imperial rule were not so sanguine about the value of "domination". In the 19th century, the historian Caroline Elkins observes: "There were 250 separate armed conflicts in the British empire, with at least one in any given year." Elkins's magnificent history of the British empire, *Legacy of Violence*, published last week, shows that far from being exceptional and benign, the empire was saturated in violence.

'Balance' can look very different in Britain's former colonies than it does in Britain

Elkins spells out in gruesome detail the savagery meted out to those who had the temerity to assert their sovereignty. In Kenya, British soldiers "tied suspects to vehicle bumpers with just enough rope to drag them to death. They employed burning cigarettes, fire and hot coals. They thrust bottles (often broken), gun barrels, knives, snakes, vermin, sticks and hot eggs up men's rectums and into women's vaginas. They crushed bones and teeth; sliced off fingers or their tips; and castrated men with specially designed instruments." And all part of what Elkins calls the "legalised lawlessness" that saturated the empire.

This is why "balance" can look very different in Britain's former colonies than it does in Britain. Something that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge discovered last week. Their official tour of the Caribbean was meant to be a charm offensive to celebrate the Queen's platinum jubilee and to dissuade other Caribbean states from joining Barbados in ditching the monarchy. They have faced protests, demands for an apology and reparations over slavery and calls for Jamaica, too, to become a republic.

For some, the fault lies (inevitably) with the Duchess of Sussex and her “propagandists” for “the damage she’s caused to the Commonwealth”. Those with a perspective broader than a Meghan-obsession might recognise that the turbulence of the royal trip is a sign of changing relationships and shifting attitudes.

The cold war is no more. And the world that gave meaning to the Commonwealth is slipping away

“What makes the importance of the Commonwealth,” the *Spectator* declared in 1957, “is its moral status [as] the only western organisation to throw a bridge between the European people and their ex-subjects of Africa and Asia.” The Commonwealth, it added, “is the only western answer so far produced to the Soviet ‘nationalities’ policy... which gave Russia a flying start in dealing with peoples emerging from colonialism”.

The cold war is no more. And the world that gave meaning to the Commonwealth is slipping away. Today, China, not Britain, or even America, is the burgeoning power in the Caribbean. As global alliances have shifted, so too have attitudes to Britain and to empire.

Politicians and the elites in former colonies are as adept as those in Britain at wielding stories about the past to buttress their rule in the present. Questions of slavery and reparations and empire are often used to deflect attention from economic mismanagement and political corruption. That does not take away from the brutal realities of colonial rule in the Caribbean. Nor from the coercive nature of the relationship with Britain even today.

One place the royal couple did not visit in Jamaica was the Open Arms Drop-In Centre, even though it is funded by Britain through its aid budget. It lies at the end of a dirt road in downtown Kingston and houses more than 70 homeless men. Britain provides money to reserve beds for deportees from this country.

Most are victims of the “hostile environment”, many are casualties of the Windrush scandal and almost all are destitute, having grown up in Britain with few connections on the island. They are simply dumped there by British immigration laws. What Jamaicans think matters little, for here, too, there is little concern with “sovereignty”.

Sovereignty certainly matters. But it matters not just when it is politically convenient. Sovereignty matters in Ukraine. It matters in the Chagos Islands. And it matters in how we should think about the British empire. That is a “balanced” view.

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