Essay question: Building on the arguments of the attached text, discuss the attraction and feasibility of the idea of the Anglosphere. Your discussion should address not only the factual side of the article but also the perspective of the author.

The Anglosphere: new enthusiasm for an old dream

Having cut Britain adrift of Europe, Brexites are indulging in an old fantasy about a new national role in the world—as the hub of a far-flung Anglosphere
by Duncan Bell / January 19, 2017, Prospect Magazine

Theresa May’s government is frantically trying to square all sorts of circles, but it cannot conceal the abject confusion about post-Brexit Britain’s place in the world. Can it act alone on a crowded stage? How can it compete against giants like the European Union, the United States, or China? Should it even try?

Many of the leading Brexiteers have proposed a simple answer to these questions: the Anglosphere. Britain, they suggest, should reanimate its long-standing relationship with its “natural” allies—principally Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. In championing this far-flung union, the Brexiteers draw—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—on a strand of thought that stretches back to the Victorian age. Like so much else about the current moment—from the planned restoration of grammar schools to cries for relaunching the Royal Yacht Britannia—the past serves as inspiration and guide. We are invited to march back to the future.

On a chilly Tuesday in December 1999, Margaret Thatcher rose to deliver a speech in New York. Her hosts were the English-Speaking Union (ESU), founded in 1918 to promote co-operation between the “English-speaking peoples.” The English-speaking world, she proclaimed, had a providential task to fulfil. “We take seriously the sanctity of the individual; we share a common tradition of religious toleration; we are committed to democracy and representative government; and we are resolved to uphold and spread the rule of law.” Citing John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Thomas Jefferson, she recommended an alliance that would “redefine the political landscape” and transform “backward areas [by] creating the conditions for a genuine world community.” A new civilising mission beckoned.

The ex-Prime Minister was not the only one airing such grandiose ideas as the new millennium approached. Indeed she was drawing on a proposal that the historian Robert Conquest had sketched in a speech to the ESU a few months earlier. At a time when the consensus was that Britain’s settled future lay in the EU, Conquest boldly charged that existing international bodies had failed. An alternative was required. He suggested an “Anglo-Oceanic” political association “weaker than a federation, but stronger than an alliance.” It would help bring peace to a violent planet. A few years later he argued that an “Anglosphere Association” would become “a centre of hope in the world... round which peace, co-operation and democracy can develop.”
Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, elites throughout the west scrambled to develop visions of a post-Cold War world. An expanded, integrated Europe seemed to many the most obvious answer. But, though few in number at first, proponents of the “Anglosphere” began to argue that elements of the British Empire should reconvene to help shape the new order. While some of them, such as the American businessman James Bennett, thought that India and the West Indies might be invited, Britain and its former settler colonies, the US included, were at the heart of the project. Proselytised by think tanks, public intellectuals and politicians from the late 1990s onwards, the idea was given impetus by Thatcher’s endorsement. With 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interest spread. George W Bush, Tony Blair, Stephen Harper and John Howard all affirmed—with varying degrees of conviction—its importance as a source of global stability and leadership.

Anchored by a shared language, culture, history and institutions, the Anglosphere’s advocates describe it as a more natural union than Europe. They dismiss the European project as inherently flawed due to the political, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of the continent. Thatcher even claimed a divine warrant for extricating Britain from Europe and (re)uniting the settler empire. “God separated Britain from mainland Europe, and it was for a purpose.” Many Anglosphere devotees regard Britain’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 as both a monumental mistake and an act of treachery—a mistake because it ignored the weakness of the European project; treachery, because it spurned our true “kith and kin.”

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of such views: Boris Johnson was mouthing a commonplace when in 2013 he criticised the British “betrayal” of Australia and New Zealand. Since the late 1990s a parade of conservative Eurosceptics have lionised the Anglosphere, including Bill Cash, David Davis, Nigel Farage, Michael Gove, Daniel Hannan, Michael Howard, Boris Johnson, Norman Lamont and John Redwood. Having drifted from the crankish fringe to the very heart of political debate, dreams of Anglosphere consummation haunt the Brexit moment.

Not all Brexiteers are devoted to the Anglosphere. Those on the left, for example, tend to steer clear. And not all of its admirers are Tories: Gordon Brown as well as Tony Blair sometimes lapsed into its rhetoric. Nor are all of them British (although most are). And commitment to the Anglosphere does not automatically translate into support for Brexit. But the connection here is a very close one. Faith in the Anglosphere furnishes staunch Eurosceptics with a ready-made vision of a post-EU future.

The latest iteration of this idea is CANZUK (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom). It envisages integration as if geography didn’t exist, with a view to creating a far-flung union with enough land and people to make itself count on the world map. The economist Andrew Lilico, a key advisor to the “Leave” campaign, has—in provocatively echoing the Treaty of Rome—called for “ever-closer” union between the countries, starting with deals on trade and free movement and a military alliance. He doesn’t rule out deeper integration later.

The Tory historian Andrew Roberts, long an evangelist of the English-speaking peoples, has taken up the cause, declaring that the Brexit vote cleared the ground for a “new federation based upon free trade, free movement of peoples, mutual defence and a limited but
effective confederal political structure.” Channelling Churchill, he decreed that CANZUK would form the “third pillar” of Western civilisation, standing proudly alongside continental Europe and the US. “It would be easily the largest country on the planet, have a combined population of 129 million, the third biggest economy and the third biggest defence budget.”

Little of this is new. Although the term “Anglosphere” was coined in the 1990s, the underlying idea has a much longer history. Winston Churchill had, after all, between the 1930s and 50s penned a four-volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, which weaved a golden Anglophone thread through a two thousand-year story stretching from Julius Caesar to the First World War. At the dawn of the 20th century, Joseph Chamberlain—the Birmingham Radical turned Tory arch-imperialist who supposedly inspires Theresa May’s chief of staff, Nick Timothy—advocated a system of preferential trading arrangements within the empire, and was a passionate champion of the English-speaking peoples. They joined a loud chorus of voices proclaiming the glory of the Anglosphere.

Indeed ideas about the Anglosphere can be traced to the debate over “imperial federation” that raged between the 1880s and the First World War. At that time scores of politicians, journalists and public intellectuals pondered the future connections between Britain and its settler colonies, as well as the relationship between the Empire and the US. They feared that Britain, shorn of its colonies and dwarfed by the American behemoth, would be reduced to a second-rate power.

Organisations such as the Imperial Federation League and the United Empire Trade League lobbied government and disseminated plans for remaking the empire. Most federalists stressed deeper integration among existing colonies, but the most excitable—including Andrew Carnegie and Cecil Rhodes—called for the unification of the “Anglo-Saxon race,” including the US. Much of the energy behind the idea was lost with the outbreak of war, but it never quite went away—re-emerging at particular moments, above all the 1940s (when the US and British Empire fought together) and the early 1970s (in the lead up to EEC accession). While the vocabulary evolved over time, with “Anglo-Saxon race” morphing into “English-speaking peoples” and now the “Anglosphere,” the basic ideas have not. Today we see a reheated version of arguments forged when Victoria reigned.

The idea of the Anglosphere is not without foundation. Britain has co-operated closely with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US—especially in security matters—for decades, as symbolised by the Five Eyes intelligence sharing system. None of this is going to change. It is this thin version of the Anglosphere—a pompous name for existing connections—that was celebrated by Bush, Blair and the other leaders in the early 2000s. Couched in platitudes, their endorsements said nothing about serious integration or new institutions or the idea that the Anglosphere was a preferable alternative to the EU. Post-Brexit Britain may well establish trade deals within the Anglosphere—though it is naive to think these will make up for lost trade with Europe—and may even introduce some limited new migration regulations. But that’s about it.

Bold claims have always been made about the unity and superiority of the Anglosphere. Roberts presents it as a single people endowed with world-historical purpose. “Just as we do not today differentiate between the Roman Republic and the imperial period of the Julio-Claudians when we think of the Roman Empire,” he asserts, “so in the future no one will
bother to make a distinction between the British Empire-led and the American Republic-led periods of English-speaking dominance.” Its most ardent believers maintain that it is destined to help lead humanity. Hannan concludes his bombastic hymn to the Anglosphere, *Inventing Freedom*, by proclaiming that the “happiness of the human race” depends on its flourishing. Such grand images of the future are usually buttressed by triumphalist stories about the past. The 20th century, Roberts declared, could be viewed as an epic “struggle between the English-speaking people’s democratic pluralism and fascist intolerance of different varieties,” including Prussian militarism, Italian and Japanese Fascism, German Nazism, Soviet Communism, and most recently, Islamic fundamentalism.

Neither the horrific violence employed in founding the settler empire—including the mass killing (even genocide) of indigenous peoples—nor the terrible legacy of this brutality, troubles such celebratory narratives. Echoes of the divisions which ultimately derailed the Victorian movement can be heard. The imperial federalists disagreed over what exactly the idea meant, and how it should be pursued. Three issues stood out: the most suitable constitutional model for the Anglosphere; economic policy; and the role of the US.

The least radical plans for imperial federation sought to reinforce existing ties with the settler colonies, without serious constitutional change. More far-reaching proposals dreamt of formal unification, up to and including the foundation of a transoceanic federal state. Others called for the creation of a system of common citizenship between members of the “English-speaking peoples,” a proposal endorsed by Churchill during the Second World War. Constitutional differences have reappeared among the inheritors of the colonial idea.

As in the late 19th century, the Anglosphere mainstream regards it as a loose alliance. Thus Hannan, for instance, favours a “devolved network of allied nations.” But as the ideas of Bennett, Conquest, Lilico and Roberts attest, there is still an appetite for building an Anglosphere polity. Conquest, for example, proposed both a Consultative Council serving as a new executive organ and a larger Assembly that would co-ordinate economic, military, and social affairs. Roberts desires a “confederal political structure.” This is straight out of the imperial federal textbook. So too is the vagueness of the proposals. Victorian federalists were often criticised for both failing to specify the crucial details of their extravagant plans or identifying any plausible strategies for realising them. They were engaging in utopian speculation, not practical politics. The same might be said of their successors. At least a few acknowledge this. Conquest described the Anglosphere Association as an exercise in “cultural and political science fiction.” But some of his fellow travellers seem rather more convinced about the feasibility of their musings.

A second fierce debate concerned the economic status of imperial federation. The dispute was between those who wanted a free trading community, a shining example for the world to emulate, and those demanding “imperial preference,” reciprocal tariff arrangements to encourage trade between members while insulating them from outside competition. While the free traders won the day, the battle convulsed the Tory Party and helped kill off support for imperial federation. But advocacy of preference never disappeared. It was enacted in 1932 and lasted, in one form or another, until Britain joined the EEC.

The economic debate is today once again dominated by free traders, though the relentless insistence on prioritising trade with the Anglosphere contains echoes of the old Chamberlain
argument. There is another striking similarity. The boosters of the Anglosphere are as bewitched as their Victorian forebears were by the belief that technology has dissolved geography. Contradicting the research of those derided experts, Davis and Fox blithely lecture us that distance is now largely irrelevant in securing the most fruitful trading relationships. The current generation of imperial federalists repeat the mistakes of their ancestors.

“The new Anglosphere boosters are, like the Victorians, bewitched by the belief that technology has dissolved geography”

During the late 19th century the US was regarded as a fierce competitor, a template for a successful federal state, and a possible member of the new political association. Most British observers acknowledged that it would overtake Britain in economic and military terms during the 20th century—the question was whether to hand over the reins or enlist Washington as a partner. For some, any plausible account of imperial federation had to incorporate the US. Rhodes imagined a time when the capital of his beloved “Anglo-Saxon race” would alternate between London and Washington. For others, including Chamberlain, the US was best left outside. For others still, the Anglo-American relationship was more important than that between Britain and its remaining colonies. At his Scottish castle, Skibo, Carnegie flew a flag with the Union Jack on one side, the Stars and Stripes on the other. Even Sherlock Holmes was enlisted. In “The Noble Bachelor” (1892) he welcomed a future in which “our children” would be “citizens of the same world-wide country whose flag should be a quartering of the Union Jack with the Stars and Stripes.”

The geopolitical calculus today is very different. Having long ago overtaken Britain, the US is now the elephant in the room. Most Anglosphere enthusiasts are happy to see it take the lead. Conquest, for example, thought the US President must lead the Anglosphere Association, though he argued that the British monarch should have a titular role to mark the historical debt owed to the UK. But the recent burst of CANZUK advocacy points in a different direction. Since any sustainable federal system cannot include a unit vastly more powerful than all the others, an Anglosphere federation is an absurdity. The US is simply too dominant. The CANZUK countries, on the other hand, are more evenly balanced. Combined, so the true believers seem to think, they can stand shoulder to shoulder with the US.

The post-1989 Anglosphere discourse has been shadowed by the nagging anxiety that Washington simply regards Britain as just one among a jostling group of collaborators. Brexit is unlikely to help. For decades, the US establishment overwhelmingly favoured UK membership of the EU, because it provided Washington with extra leverage in transatlantic relations. Barack Obama’s intervention in the referendum campaign was no anomaly (Donald Trump’s enthusiasm for Brexit is). The Prime Ministers of Australia, Canada and New Zealand likewise declared for UK membership. Despite the confident proclamations of the Eurosceptics—and the crowing of Nigel Farage, Trump’s fantasy-ambassador—it is far from clear how future American administrations will view London. It is just as likely that Brexit will weaken transatlantic relations as strengthen them.

Dreams of deep Anglosphere integration, and of political unification, are symptomatic expressions of colonial nostalgia, underwritten by fears about Britain’s declining status. They tell us far more about the wishful thinking and delusions of grandeur of the British elite than
they do about economic and geopolitical realities. In demographic terms, CANZUK makes little sense. Decades of immigration have had a profound effect on the populations of Australia, Canada and New Zealand—they are far less “Anglo” than they once were. Meanwhile, the leaders of Canada’s large Quebecois community will never support integration with Britain. Despite much shared history, the social basis for union is corroding. Geopolitically the cards are also stacked against CANZUK. The strategic priorities of Australia and New Zealand are in the Pacific and Indian oceans, and the US is their most important ally. Canada too is so closely aligned with Washington that it is fanciful to imagine any significant reorientation.

While British politicians and citizens alike are favourably disposed to the members of the Anglosphere, there is no significant support for a new international organisation. A federation would sit uneasily with the parliamentary sovereignty so dear to Brexiteers, as well as the marked nationalism of recent Tory discourse. The promise of substituting one federal model for another will gain little traction.

The Victorian prophets of imperial federation lost the battle while winning the war. They failed to build an imperial union or reunify the so-called “Anglo-Saxon race.” Such ideas never secured enough support from the leading politicians of the day—Gladstone, Disraeli and Salisbury all rejected imperial federation as either undesirable, unworkable, or both. Despite some enthusiasm from sympathetic colonists, federation plans fell flat across the oceans. Many colonial politicians were keen to carve out greater autonomy from Britain, not bind themselves closer in. In the US the federalists were typically ignored or ridiculed.

No matter. The Anglosphere was at the forefront of late Victorian debates about global politics, and it has never gone away. The current revival of such ideas is a testament both to their success and to the mesmeric grip that the empire retains over swathes of the British governing class. It is one of those ideas on which the sun never sets.