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From Balfour to Boris: British
Hegemony at the League of Nations

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The General Assembly of the United Nations is renowned for its flamboyant speeches. Every year it hosts a kind of pantomime of the international, from the banging of shoes on the podium, caricatures of cartoon bombs to Ghaddafi pulling out his infamous golden gun. The past year's most surreal performance came from Britain's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.¹ Johnson tapped into his knowledge of classics, which he read at Oxford, by using the allegory of the tale of Prometheus, the Titan from Greek mythology who brought fire down from Mount Olympus to mankind against the will of the Gods. He (Prometheus not Boris) was subsequently punished for his actions and punished by having his liver ripped out and devoured by vultures, only for it to regrow overnight so that the grisly ritual could continue in perpetuity.

For anyone that has followed recent British politics, everyday feels a bit like the experience of Prometheus, but behind the flabbergasted expressions of the Prime Minister's ambassadorial colleagues lies a long history of Britain's involvement in the establishment of the international system. Although Johnson was using Prometheus to talk about emerging technologies, the tale permits a broader spectrum of possible analogies. To squeeze the final drop from the myth, 2019 marked the centenary of the League of Nations and the modern international system. For many internationalists, this was a moment when Woodrow Wilson came down to Paris, carrying the Promethean flame of international cooperation to war-torn Europe, only for his political career to be picked apart by the Republican Senate back in Washington, blocking the United States' entry into the League of Nations.

Not unlike the aforementioned myth, this embellished story of the origins of the international system is also largely a legend. The United States failure to ratify the Versailles Treaty left Britain in a position of paramountcy over the nascent international institutions. Not only did Britain have a seat on the League's Council, the Precursor to the UN Security Council, it also dominated the League's Assembly through separate representation for its Dominions and colonies; effectively giving it an additional five votes. British thinkers and politicians played a pivotal role in the drafting of the structure of the League, leaving an imprint in the origins of the international system. Britain's position in the early League is an example of the intricate connection of the foundation of international organisations and the foreign policy of the so called 'great powers'. If Wilson had brought the gift of fire to mankind (or as most historians know, only half of mankind), it was a flame closely maintained in an English fireplace.

That's not to demote the role that other states had in the creation of the League. The meetings of the great powers were held in the room of Monsieur Pichon at the Quai d'Orsay after all, not Downing Street. France too had a vision for the League, but became increasingly side-lined by an Anglo-American entente that made them a relatively marginal power. France's primary aims were to curb German power, not Britain's. Its position in exacting vengeance against Germany, put France at odds with both Britain and the United States, as did the French plan for the League that was based on legalistic obligations to intervene in disputes. The plan drafted by Leon Bourgeois was ignored by all, including the French Premier Clemenceau, who had political disagreements with him.

Other French actions such as trying to base the League of Nations in Brussels rather than in Geneva were also thwarted. The archival record shows a lively debate in which the British attempted to outmanoeuvre the French, with one of the League's major British

¹ This is an excerpt from the speech: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z4K_G14_Ho



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founders, Robert Cecil calling the French 'idiots', and another British officer suggested putting the League in Morocco's Tangier where the weather was more agreeable. France was thus consistently side-lined by first Britain and later by the United States in what form the League should take, its purpose as well as where it should be located.

The United States too played a pivotal role in the creation of the League and attempted to go beyond Britain's vision of a limited international Congress at Geneva. Wilson initially attempted to put the breaks to Britain's plans of representing its colonies at the League, as did France, but ultimately backed down in the face of British insistence. The British establishment wanted an international organisation, but one run at their political discretion, not by mandated juridical oversight that would force Britain to conform to common rules. This perspective was shared by Wilson, who the British had initially viewed with trepidation due to his perceivably idealist speeches. The British wanted Wilson's internationalist idealism to espouse principles for its members, but not tie them to obligations. As one of the most significant powers with the widest global influence in the League, Britain did not want the role of the League's global policeman, or for the League to infringe on British sovereignty (creating a long legacy of British suspicion towards international organisations).

The British Imperial vision even within its establishment was not always uniform. In a surprise move, a pamphlet was released by Jan Smuts, Premier of the British Dominion of South Africa, less than three weeks before the Paris Peace Conference started. Smut's plan was considerably more radical, and at odds with the British government plan. His vision was simultaneously far-reaching in the responsibilities given to the League and imperial in its intended domination of the colonised world. He saw the League as a form of giant Commonwealth that could accommodate Britain's Dominions (self-governing colonies) as near independent entities, whilst 'civilizing' the rest of the world who he deemed 'barbarians'. This would lead to the Mandate's principle, and it was one in which Smuts wanted to entice the United States into partaking in the 'civilising mission'. Much of Smut's motivation however was to conquer German colonies in Africa and control immigration from Asia to South Africa, leading historian A.J.P Taylor to brand Smuts 'the great operator of fraudulent idealism'. Smut's vision for the League was not accepted in its totality, but elements of it were incorporated into the League's final version. Smut's lobbying lead to the multiple representation of British Dominions and India at the League of Nations. Despite his racist vision of global governance, Smuts was called in again to write the preamble for the United Nations charter, revealing some disturbing continuity between the two organisations.

The British government position was crystallised in the report by Lord Phillimore, which on paper created a new kind of organisation, but in practise set out to create something not dissimilar to the 'Congress' of European states, that had dominated inter-state diplomacy after the fall of Napoleon. This ensured the hegemony of the Great Powers in decision making, rather than following what the British deemed to be the more abstract notion of sovereign equality among states; an ideal the British believed to be fancifully American and did not reflect the reality of international politics. One of Britain's longest held objections to international organisations since their inception in the mid-19th century was the debate over how much representation great powers should have. Inter-state equality as the United States had attempted to enshrine at the Hague Conferences was detested by the British, and believed it was flouted by the US by using *de jure* independent Latin American states as proxies for their own foreign policy. Nonetheless, British negotiations were keen to dispel accusations that they were recreating the Congress of Vienna or the Holy Alliance. Wilson too had been suspicious of the British maintaining the imperial status quo, and feared that British aims would de-legitimise the League from the outset. The League had to effectively rebrand old methods of great power politics through new means.

The tension between the idea of a Congress versus an international organisation would lead to the creation of the League Council; the forefather of the current UN Security Council. This safeguarded the rights of the great powers to a permanent seat which meant that great power politics was in the DNA of the institution. Moreover, with the failure of the United States to join the League, Britain was left in a powerful position within the League's Council. Yet this compromise manufactured between America and Britain was not favoured by the other Council members, France and Italy, nor by smaller states. They revolted at their lack of representation at the Council, accusing British statesmen like Robert Cecil of recreating the 'Holy Alliance' of the 19th century (which was not far from the truth). It was smaller states that forced through a new compromise of having rotating membership for non-permanent members on the League Council. This early intervention of the smaller states has set an important legacy of their ability to force larger powers to compromise, yet the retention of a veto by the permanent members meant that they were second class citizens at the Council.



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The Congress of Vienna and Holy Alliance were both intrinsically reactionary forces, trying to rebuild the pre-Revolutionary monarchical consensus and restrain the growth of liberalism. The League was faced with similar difficulties, with the global conflagration of the Great War leaving behind it a legacy of nationalist, anti-colonial and socialist revolutions. These movements that challenged the imperial powers were unlikely to receive much sympathy from the League of Nations. Though some Eastern European states would make the cut and would gain membership at the League, the colonies of the Allied powers would not be granted an equivalent status. Moments of excessive violence against protestors such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in India, the repression of the 'Black and Tans' paramilitaries in Ireland, the Egyptian Revolution as well as repression in the French and Japanese Empires were largely ignored in Paris or Geneva. Many other nascent states begged for membership in 1920, especially ex-Russian territories, yet the League's lack of obligations coupled with British reluctance led to the rapid extinguishment of the Georgian, Armenian and Ukrainian Republics by the Soviets. Not unlike recent events in the Middle East, British troops were first withdrawn from Tbilisi prior to Russian invasion.

At the end of negotiations, Britain had extended its Empire, albeit through the League monitored Mandates, and retained near mastery of the seas. The many supplicants for representation at the Peace Congress from across the French and British Empires (which included Ho-Chi-Minh and Gandhi) were ignored by Wilson. Britain's success at securing its aims in Paris was one of the most significant reasons to argue against the United States entry into the League of Nations. Republican politicians refused to join an organisation where the British Empire wielded six votes to one American vote, and Wilson's failure to confront Britain about its excesses in Ireland soured Irish American voters against the League. When asked how he thought negotiations went, British Prime Minister Lloyd George once famously responded: 'Not badly, considering I was seated between Jesus Christ and Napoleon' (Referring to Wilson and Clemenceau).

The cynical reality of the creation of the League are known to most scholars of its history. British intellectuals such as Alfred Zimmern played a role in theorising the shape of the League and would establish the academic field of International Relations. In doing so he would establish new centres of research such as the International Relations department at Aberystwyth in Wales; or perhaps more relevantly to this audience, the Graduate Institute (though some members of its history department would be very quick to point out the Rockefeller Foundation's contribution to establishing the Institute too). Even the first Secretary General, Eric Drummond was an Eton educated veteran of the British civil service, whilst British colonial officers sat on the board of the Mandates Commission.

Britain's example in the early 20th century in its foundation of the League and its predominant position within it is a reminder that the politics of international organisations are inexorably linked with that of the great powers. From the backroom deals in Paris to the Yalta and Dumbarton Oaks conferences prior to the creation of the UN, hegemony has shaped the international system to their vision of global order. The League would not have come into existence if it did not compliment British power or threatened to undermine its Empire, and the same was true of the creation of the UN when British power had severely diminished.

Back to the present day, Johnson's speech at the United Nations General Assembly is a lament to country that once dominated the international institutions, with what he represents to the rest of the world in Brexit is a very real example of decline. Britain's position in the world has changed considerably since British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour went to Paris in 1919, to Boris Johnson's rambling in front of the rest of the world. To some extent it was the imperial fantasies of the early 20th century that contributed to his internal election by members of the Conservative Party, a nostalgia for something that has been gone for over half a century. Rather than acting as guarantors of British hegemony and norms, many international organisations are seen merely as 'safety nets' from complete international isolation in the scenario of Britain crashing out of the European Union.

Even the powers that superseded Britain such as the United States are retreating from the use of international organisations. Budgets and salaries at the UN have been slashed, with the UN Secretary General announcing at the General Assembly that the UN was facing a cash-flow crisis due to unpaid contributions, largely from the US. One official from the Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights even complained to me saying that Geneva collects more money from parking violations than his organisation's whole budget. The financial question is an important one, as it poses the question of who is the UN important to today? The US has often



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contributed to the UN and its institutions before based on their perceived utility and have withdrawn funding when an institution has defied their foreign policy. Yet the significance of the American contribution to the international system makes it susceptible to political ransom.

With the United States once again questioning its commitment to international organisations by both withdrawing from them or defunding them, the question looming over the UN is who will make up the shortfall? Because of the UN and League's history, many will look towards other 'great powers', but the multipolar world that was promised by international relations theorists is still yet to materialise. Currently there is only one potential challenger to Washington, Beijing, and the current trade war between these two giants is being watched carefully by all international actors, and will have a huge impact on the future of the international system. Nonetheless, China is unlikely to become the champion of the UN as it exists today. Though it will likely be a force in trade and economic organisations such as the WTO, China still claims to be a developing economy whilst it disavows much of the western universal values system that the UN promulgates, and to which the US has often paid lip service to.

Like the revolt of the small states in 1919 which gained them their non-permanent seats at the League Council, smaller states may see merit in supporting the international system. Smaller states have played an important role in the UN, especially so in the General Assembly, by shaping new norms and participating in international activities. Yet they have rarely been the most significant sponsors of the international system. Potentially expanding the security council to new members that have long sought a permanent seat may reinvigorate the organisation, and with countries such as Britain and France still occupying seats due to their history, it may be difficult to provide an adequate response to why other states cannot become permanent members too.

One of the directions that the international system seems to be evolving in the direction of is the presence of more private interests. Bodies such as the World Economic Forum, now an official international organisation have weathered the storm of funding cuts that state based organisations have been hit by. The private-public partnership model is growing, but the presence of states is still the cornerstone of the international system. Even if Jeff Bezos has the net worth of the GDP of the Ukraine (after his divorce it's now closer to that of Morocco), billionaires like Bill Gates cannot, and probably should not fund the international system by themselves.

Britain's history at the foundation of the League of Nations shows the predominant role they had in conceptualising, negotiating and putting into practice international organisations from the outset. Many member-states will increasingly look to international organisations to tackle issues over climate change, trade and control of global diseases, and its unclear in the long run whether they will keep looking to the US to return a President that will restore the pre-Trumpian status quo. So, for this centenary of the international system, figuring out who the United Nations and its organs are useful to will shape the international systems future.

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