

Trump State Visit to UK: Queen Elizabeth II and the “Trump Traumatic Disorder”

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Trump Traumatic Disorder has been making its way across the Atlantic, numbing British officials, activists and commentators on one vital point: Should President Donald J. Trump be able to see the Queen on an official state visit?

A good deal of this was sparked by Trump’s executive order banning travel from seven Muslim majority states. On a daily basis, academics feature on BBC Radio 4 speaking about how travelling to the United States, notably with a Muslim name, is now a disturbing improbability. Internally they are wounded; externally, they are outraged.

The UK Home Secretary has also been full of advice for Trump, suggesting that his travel ban was a rich gift to the Islamic State, a “propaganda opportunity” born from wrongheaded and divisive thinking.

Before the Home Affairs Committee, Rudd claimed that the order did not, on the face of it, amount to a “Muslim ban” per se, but the Islamic State would “use any opportunity they can to make difficulties, to create the environment they want to radicalise people, to bring them over to their side. So it is a propaganda opportunity for them, potentially.”[1]

To US Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, Rudd was also unhappy, shooting off a message of disapproval at the ban, citing “difficulties and the response that was taking place in London and across the country.”

In a very British way, one often coated with a hypocritical varnish, a ban, or downgrade of Trump’s visit is being debated amongst a range of other possibilities. Should it, for instance, be downgraded from dizzy formal state visit with state banquet to something less? Previous US presidents have tended to visit usually within months of the inauguration, but the idea of a State visit is deemed a plush, serious affair.

In Britain’s glorious past and current present of courting blood hungry dictators, sadistic beasts and mindless buffoons, it should hardly register a comment. State interests, notably from those states with an imperial pedigree, have seen all manner of flexibility triumph over principle. Money, strategic interests and geopolitics all talk the most loudly at a state banquet.

But Trump’s ability to rile even in his absence, to shock even as a shadow of menace, is fast becoming the stuff of legend. He is generating an absurd premise: that he, as a politician, is singular and should, therefore, be treated accordingly.

This cult of perverse exceptionality should be discouraged. A whirl through previous state

visits in history should suffice to do this, starting with the post-colonial cast of characters Britain so enthusiastically backed as puppets for its waning cause. In 1973, the murderous Mobutu Sese Seko, president of Zaire, received the state treatment. His resume was deemed suitable in one way: his lack of any possible Soviet influence during the Cold War.

Zimbabwe's seemingly immovable post-independence leader, Robert Mugabe, now deemed a maniacal, destructive pariah, was accepted as a royal guest in 1994. It was also an occasion to award him a knighthood, one he was stripped of in 2008. It was all so appropriate: a leader celebrated for being trained and nourished in the British tradition, and one who used it to throw grenades back at the scorned imperial mother.

Strategic interests have always mattered, though influence exerted during these visits could be exaggerated. The visit by Indonesia's President Suharto (1979), whose hands were caked in the blood of internal repression, was awkward at best. The visit by Japan's Emperor Hirohito in 1971 was even frostier, marked by silent crowds and turned backs from former prisoners of war.

While generally being an overflowing font of nonsense, UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson at least had a point in saying that the record suggested that Trump could pass muster. If the Queen could host in all seriousness Robert Mugabe and Romania's infamous, megalomaniacal Nicolai Ceaușescu, then the UK could "probably cope" with Trump.

Johnson's refusal to attack Trump in the Commons conformed to a long held policy not to berate the United States, and certainly not its president. Besides, he had received assurances from Trump's inner circle that the travel ban would not affect British citizens.

This is the sort of event to be recognised for what it is: ceremonial concealment, false posturing, a ridiculous effort in the modern era for Britain to exert "soft power". It is also soft power that falls significantly flat at points, notably when it comes to visiting French Presidents. From Charles de Gaulle's 1960 state visit onwards, the banquet has been a battle ground of gastronomic resentment and mistreatment.

What seems unusual was Prime Minister Theresa May's moment of weakness, the lap dog's enthusiasm for wanting to seem enthusiastic about an imperial master. "Theresa the Appeaser," chided Mike Gapes, Labour MP for Ilford South. On her visit to Washington, the British leader seemed to ignore the tradition that Her Majesty's Government usually waits before doling out the full blooded invitation. Caution and prudent assessment of the leader's unfolding record should take place.

As Lord Ricketts, permanent secretary at the Foreign Office from 2006 to 2010 explained in a letter to The Times, "It would have been far wiser to wait to see what sort of president he would turn out to be before advising the Queen to invite him. Now the Queen is put in a very difficult position." Far better, in other words, to have runs on the board, whether elected or as a dictator, before being given the royal Britannic treatment. The Queen will generally tolerate any old thing.

Besides, delighted Simon Tisdall in The Guardian, the two million signatories of the online petition calling for the invitation to be rescinded should also "take comfort from suggestions that state visits can carry the kiss of political, if not mortal, death."^[2] Witness all those royals who are now nothing more than historical murmurs: the Shah of Iran in 1959, banished by the mullahs; or King Mohammed Zahir Shah of Afghanistan (1971), his family

erased by history. Visit, suggested Tisdall in rather sinister tone, and be damned.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38814346>

[2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/30/donald-trump-state-visit-uk-controversial-tradition>

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