

Global Birmingham?

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

Tomorrow sees the third annual CBS conference, brought to you via Zoom. Titled '[Global Birmingham – Beyond Brexit](#)'. The conference will focus on Birmingham and the wider West Midlands beyond Brexit, looking at topics such as the Commonwealth Games, HS2, Manufacturing and the future of the city and region in a post-Brexit (and Covid19) landscape.

As “negotiations” with the EU appear to be going nowhere, the most likely outcome appears to be No Deal (or to use Whitehall parlance, a “non-negotiated agreement”). At present, negotiations appear to be stumbling on the issues of fishing and regulatory alignment. State aid appears to be a particularly acute point of contention, with the EU wanting to avoid the risk of being undercut by state-assisted companies and the UK wanting to maintain very substantial control over its ability to subsidise companies.

Ultimately, the remarkable admission by the UK government that it is prepared to break international law and effectively ignore parts of the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated less than a year ago has eroded trust and risks poisoning relations yet further. In this context, the prospect of a prolonged period of economic and political chaos lies ahead.

For Birmingham, a city once described as the Workshop of the World, the likely impact of a hard Brexit will be particularly pronounced, given our dependence on key manufacturing sectors, notably the automotive industry clustered in the city and surrounds. That key firms such as Jaguar Land Rover have been unable to access UK Government financial assistance under the much-hyped ‘Project Birch’ in the face of Treasury orthodoxy threatens to undermine a key national strategic asset and belies a genuine commitment to “levelling up”.

It was noted in *the Guardian* that “JLR had raised £560m from five Chinese banks in June, in a signal to the Treasury that it had opportunities for securing funds”. However, the “carmaker had been

excluded from a Bank of England support scheme because its debt was not rated as investment-grade before the crisis began, meaning it was seen as too risky.”[\[1\]](#) As such, the need for a clear-cut regional manufacturing strategy has never been more acute.

Suffice to say, these prospects pose a major challenge to conventional narratives that posit the city-region (e.g., the “post-industrial city”) as the pre-eminent unit in the world economy, and downplay the nation-state. With a focus on the 2022 Commonwealth Games, we explore these issues in our new article, “Brexit, Birmingham and the 2022 Commonwealth Games: an opportunity for regeneration and rejuvenation?” just published on-line in *Managing Sport and Leisure*.[\[2\]](#)

We also highlight the tensions brought about by the dis-junction between the economic necessity for cities to continue to be operators in a global economy, as opposed to political imperatives that inadvertently re-impose borders, or substitute one set of international economic relationships with another.

Regional stakeholders experience particular challenges having to operate between competing national agendas on the one hand and differences of opinion amongst their own constituencies on the other. Brexit in the UK has thrown these tensions into sharp focus, placing a particular set of pressures upon conventional approaches to place leadership, with our Chambers of Commerce, Local Authorities and the Combined Authority, and Higher Education Providers all seeking to fulfil their core missions amidst conflicting views amongst their own members and constituents.

To this has been added the challenge of responding to Covid19, which has severely impacted on social consumption sectors such as pubs, restaurants and cafes as social distancing measures have taken effect and white-collar professionals continue to work from home. With the prospects that the shifts induced by Covid19 will lead to longer-term reconfigurations of the way we live and work, particular challenges emerge for city centres as traditional “agglomeration economies” in terms of urban design, public transport, high-density living, and retail and recreational spaces.

As such, the event will bring together a wide range of speakers from across the West Midlands and the UK to discuss the post-Brexit environment, with keynote speeches and panel discussions.

Our keynote speakers include Sir Vince Cable, former leader of the Liberal Democrats and Visiting Professor at CBS; Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London and Director of UK in a Changing Europe, and; Fiona Allan, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Birmingham Hippodrome, President of UK Theatre and board member of Midlands Arts Council and West Midlands Growth Company.

These keynote speeches will be complemented by Panel discussions on the following themes: Sport and Regeneration post-Brexit – The Commonwealth Games; Manufacturing – The Impact on the Region; HS2; and the Future of the West Midlands. With the 2022 Commonwealth Games being staged in Birmingham the conference will provide critical insights as to whether the games will promote significant economic development opportunities and business links with Commonwealth countries.

The conference will provide a platform for discussion and feedback, with a mix of academics, business people and politicians, and as such, we welcome comment and reflections on the issues discussed. Participants will be able to share their thoughts online with our hashtag [#CBSGlobalBrum](#), and also to follow the Centre on our Twitter account [@BCU_Brexit](#). The conference will also be recorded and uploaded onto our YouTube channel later this month.

Will HS2 continue to have the same appeal or necessity if commuting into London (and Birmingham) city centre dramatically diminishes? Can the region enact a viable strategy to support manufacturing in the face of the short-term challenges of Covid19 and Brexit, and the longer-term challenges of automation and climate change? How do we keep our vibrant arts and creative industries going in this time of crisis? Can we take advantage of the Commonwealth Games to increase our profile and business links with Commonwealth countries? Join us tomorrow, where we will discuss all these issues.

[1] See <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/sep/21/manufacturers-slash-investment-as-bailout-scheme-gathers-dust>

[2] See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23750472.2020.1820369>