

Is this what we voted for?

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

It was at 1647 hrs yesterday that I received an alert from the 'Solihull Updates' page on Facebook that the UK Government had designated the use of Car Park 6 at Birmingham International Airport to be converted to an (albeit "temporary") Inland Border Facility and was now going through motions of securing the requisite permissions via a Special Development Order.

According to the Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council spokesperson, "the site would act as an office for starting and ending transit movement of goods to and from the UK [JLR take note]. It would include parking areas for Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) and other vehicles as well as security measures and facilities to enable the checking of vehicles and goods entering and exiting the site".[\[1\]](#)

As approval for this rests directly with Robert Jenrick as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government the local authority has effectively been side-lined (serving only as a consultee), one can assume it to be a formality.

And so it is that the M42 corridor by the airport – one of the busiest transport routes in the country -will become the site for one of the Government's 10 inland border checkpoints, although whether it will be fully operational by the end of the year is questionable (only one earmarked site, in Ashford in Kent, is up and running).

And make no mistake as to what this will entail. With up to 198 spaces set to be provided, hundreds of lorries queuing to be checked, with the potential for tailbacks disrupting traffic flows around the Coventry Road (although perhaps less so into the Airport itself given that Covid-19 has largely grounded the air passenger sector). Sanitary checks, phyto-sanitary checks, customs declarations and other security checks.

And this scenario will be repeated elsewhere in the country, but especially in Kent, where our heavy reliance on the port of Dover and the Channel Tunnel will see thousands of lorries at a time in such

checkpoints, waiting for requisite paperwork to be processed (and of course this will be repeated on the other side of the Channel). One doesn't need to be a logistics expert to see the massive potential for bottlenecks that this will entail across the UK.

This will have an impact on supply chains, affecting the availability of everything from parts and components for automotive manufacture, all the way through to the availability of products in supermarkets. Consider, for example, that over 80% of our toilet paper is imported in some fashion[2] and the EU, particularly Sweden and Finland, are major producers of the pulp used to make toilet paper[3]. This was probably not what people had in mind when they voted to “take back control”.

And here is the crux – this is what we will get WITH a trade “deal” with the EU. Assuming that we can get one over the remaining few weeks (whatever the commitment of UK and EU negotiators to “intensify” the pace of negotiations going forward).

Without a deal, we can add the imposition of a tariff regime on our exports to EU countries. That this could devastate sectors such as fishing (some 70% of whose catch is exported to the EU) or UK farmers rearing lamb and beef for export, makes it all the more perplexing that so many of them should be ardent Brexit supporters.

With that in mind, we undertook focus group research in the West Midlands and Scotland over the past couple of months to try and understand current attitudes to Brexit, whether people felt their localities were “left behind” and what their thoughts were on devolution. In total we conducted 8 focus groups (5 in the West Midlands and 3 in Scotland), with a combined attendance of 38 participants.

We'll be presenting findings of our work at a [Zoom Webinar on October 28th](#), but we were particularly interested in whether participants in the West Midlands who voted Leave in 2016 still felt the same way, given the economic uncertainty that looms over our impending departure from the EU Customs Union and Single Market at the end of this year.

As such, the views expressed by participants in our research were interesting to say the least. In Dudley, one respondent (who voted Remain and was a teacher by training), argued that ingrained family beliefs could obstruct the influence of formal education in seeking to provide a “factual” analysis of the likely impact of Brexit.

Some views expressed were simply erroneous – for example that of one participant in Lichfield appeared to think that membership of the EU had somehow prevented the UK from trading with the rest of the world.

Where acknowledgment of the likely economic disruption of Brexit was recognised by our Leave participants, it was often accompanied by notions that any disruption would pass. Two older participants in Dudley said that whilst they expected disruption, it would only be in “the short term” and that eventually “we will get through it”.

More prescient was a remark in the same focus group by another participant that he did not expect Brexit to usher in significant disruption to business so long as they had “planned in advance”.

This was an insightful comment – but when compared to the views of businesses such as those represented by the British Chambers of Commerce, who highlight that many of their member firms are still struggling to prepare for Brexit. This suggests some element of wishful thinking in understating the likely impact of Brexit on businesses and the wider economy. Indeed, as the British Chambers argue:

“Facing the triple threat of a resurgent Coronavirus, tightening restrictions and a disorderly end to the transition period, it is little wonder businesses are struggling to prepare. Many firms will be tired of posturing, cliff edges and deadlines, while others are still grappling with fundamental challenges as a result of the pandemic.” [\[4\]](#)

Given the prospect of significant disruption to supply chains and logistics come January 1st next year, how many who voted Leave might well wake up and wonder why Kent has been turned into a lorry park and we’ve all taken a hit to our living standards, in the form of higher prices and job losses. Particularly when they were told by Messer’s Johnson and Gove back in 2016 that the UK would keep all

the benefits of membership after leaving the EU club, or that the UK held “all the cards in negotiations”.

Or to paraphrase, “Yes I voted for Brexit, but not for this!”

[1] https://inlandborderfacilities.uk/?page_id=82

[2] The Confederation of Paper Industries stated last year that the UK used approximately 1.3 million tonnes of tissue per year. Of this, about 1.1 million of was imported either as a finished product or as a component. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-47640908>

[3] <https://worldpapermill.com/top-pulp-paper-producing-countries/>

[4] <https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/news/2020/10/bcc-responds-to-time-is-running-out-campaign>