Let’s Talk about Human Brain and Decision making and…Brexit

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For more than 20 years now, neuroscience, behavioural economics and other scientific disciplines have shattered many myths about decision-making and human behaviour, and especially the stubborn fixation on the notion that logic rules.

This belief is going fast out of fashion since our capacity for rational and analytical thinking is found not to be *the* absolute human capability. Neuroscience is clear: humans are not, and should not be, pure rational creatures.

Replacing rationality with a more complex, deep and, dare we say, holistic view and understanding of the inner workings of the human brain and of how it influences our lives, is crucial for understanding human behaviour.

The brain defines our behaviour overall including feelings, thoughts and attitudes. The main target of the brain is to keep us safe and alive. In order to do so, it follows its own “rationale” that evolved through the millennia.

Human brain’s rationale of keeping us alive is governed by specific principles. First of all our brain likes to predict things. Secondly, it directs us to pick easy solutions. Finally, our brain conserves energy for us. Did you notice anything? Can you see the underline idea of the above principles? Well, it is one and only, the brain is evolutionary programmed to pick those paths that guarantee better chances of survival.

It is not you, but your brain which is taking the decisions that according to it (not necessarily true) can give you more chances of survival. Survival means something very specific, but can also be viewed from various aspects of life.

Our brains have learned to react negatively to any changes that threat potential aspects of our existence. For example, when we deal with an economic threat, our brains tend to interpret it like an actual threat for our lives.

Why? Because the brain, evolutionary speaking, has learned to respond in a similar way to whatever was provoking fear and stress. And what is the response of the brain? Well, the brain will try to guide you towards these options that will not be considered as the risky ones.

Does this reminds you anything? Yes, it does. It reminds you about change and our reactions. We do not react usually negative to change because we are mean or naturally born resistors to change. We react negatively because our brains says to do so. Change is similar to uncertainty and in an uncertain situation, the brain cannot predict and does not know the outcome.

Now, based on the above, consider Brexit and those that need to take decisions about it from both sides (UK and EU). What is Brexit?

Simply put it, is a process of change….well a long one. How do we react to a change like this? Independently on what hard UK Brexiteers or EU politicians and diplomats will say, one thing is for sure; they feel uncomfortable. Actually, some of them say they feel anxious about it and especially its final outcome.

In short, I argue that no matter what officials from the either side officially claim, in reality, a completely new and uncertain situation like this is perceived (subconsciously at least) as a threat by their brains (well, to our brains as well).

In uncertain situations, ambiguity dominates and ambiguity is perceived as a threat since the brain does not know what to make of it. People prefer a negative outcome rather than the threat of the unknown which stimulates anxiety and fear.

Also, the more complex the situation, the more uncertainty and fear of the unknown outcome will emerge. Brexit falls into this category. It is complex, uncertain and an ambiguous change that is perceived as an uncomfortable threat for the brain.

So, the next question is what decision makers from both sides (and mainly from the UK one) will do?

If we believe the above, we can reach the conclusion that probably decision makers will push for a less uncertain outcome (maybe the current agreement) rather than an uncertain and ambiguous one (a non-deal Brexit).

The short future will prove this wrong or right.