

A Nation of Opinions: a rumination on Brexit Britain's growing industry

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The British identity, from an economic perspective, is a strange and fluctuating beast. For me growing up in Sussex, this identity was unquestionably founded in a service-based economy, directly linked to expansion in business and finance and driven by trickle-down benefits from London and the 'Square Mile'. On relocating to Birmingham in 2011, it was notable how radically this discourse changed, founded in its legacy as 'workshop of the world' acquired during the heady days of British manufacturing. Travel 100 miles south, into my mother's heartland of Wiltshire and Somerset, we become a nation of farmers and, latterly, shopkeepers providing a mythicised link between the people and the land.

Whilst this illustrates both how diverse an economy can be and its changing iterations within a national context, it also indicates its temporality. Industry is in a constant state of flux driven by a complex interweaving of resource availability, market conditions, human capital, regulatory environments, and investment-based opportunity costs. In the past we have been (self) identified as a nation of seafarers, skilled manufacturers, shopkeepers, and bankers. In the current environment, I feel we are going through yet another transition.

Since our marginal collective decision – or 'the will of the people' as it seems to be widely regarded in some corners – in 2016, I have spent a not unreasonable amount of time attending Brexit-themed events. Some of these have been as a member of the audience, others as a purported expert speaker or member of a panel of specialists. The objective of such events is of course quite understandable; in an environment of great uncertainty, people turn to those who appear to have superior knowledge or understanding to establish some semblance of meaning. That this should come during a period when people have purportedly had 'enough of experts' is rich with irony.

Of course, the problem here is that this cottage industry in expert opinions is actually nothing of the kind. Instead the twitter storm and its manipulation through various bot-led interventions has resulted in a denigration of informed opinion in the Brexit debate. In place of those who have specialist knowledge of specific phenomena, either through research or direct experience, we get novices in positions of influence ranging from David Davis to Julia Hartley-Brewer. Enjoying a privileged position ennobled through the masses' preference for US-style soundbites and controversy over reason-informed debate, these individuals are perpetually allowed to present opinion as fact on international treaties and trade agreements. This occurs over and above those who are informed, experienced and wholly aware of such complex matters.

Of course, a resistance has to some extent emerged. At its best this provides us with the astute and objective analysis of centres such as The UK in a changing Europe and our own Centre for Brexit Studies. Even here however, the uncertainty and lack of clarity of direction sees such confluences of specialism under-utilised. Below this, we see demand outstrip supply as panels of localised experts regurgitate tepid observations on why this is happening, what it means, and how/why the EU was/wasn't good for the UK as a political/economic/social/cultural union/experiment. I'm not sure there has been a time in British history when so much has been spoken and so little actually said.

Of course, in some ways this democratisation of expertise should be celebrated. Let's take the great recession (remember 2007, when our crises were simply financial rather than political, cultural and constitutional?). One of the principal factors here was a dogged belief amongst an industry of neo-classical vested interests that we had seen the death of boom and bust. Instead, we got a crash so severe partially just because experts had convinced themselves this could not happen. Similarly, the Government's austerity agenda. Founded on work by US economists Reinhart and Rogoff, their paper 'Growth in a time of debt' arguing direct positive correlation between higher debt and lower growth, was the foundation for 2010's austerity policies. It was also, it turns out, incorrect as Herndon et al identified in 2013. The opening of debates and integration of unorthodox perspectives and specialisms is not necessarily a bad thing.

The real issue here is the extent to which the lowest common denominator mentality of much of this argument can align itself with an increasingly complex world. As we are more socially mobile, politically and economically integrated, and technologically advanced, the outcome of these processes becomes more difficult to predict. It is thus essential broad churches of opinion, both citizen concerns and expert understanding, are integrated into the democratic process. The issue of plastics illustrates this complexity, and the extent to which any advice on their historic regulation and production was capable of predicting its long-term environmental impact and contamination of the food chain and atmosphere. Mitigating the broad impacts of such complexity requires broader input than those of Wetherspoon's landlord Tim Martin and fantasist macro-economist Patrick Minford.

We have of course fallen into a very convenient trap. The formation of distinctive tribes of 'leave' and 'remain' belie a set of complex questions poorly conveyed through mainstream media and 280 characters. This similarly replicates an ongoing transition in the way we communicate and consume, a world where the primary rationale is to influence. In academia, impact becomes increasingly important which shapes both practice and methodology to fit accepted over experimental approaches. Journalists are scrutinised not for quality and rigour but circulation. Politicians avoid engagement in difficult debates, instead reducing issues to simple equations. The pace of consumption becomes dependent on a downward spiral of patronage for products and places, judging quality on a 'virality' easily disposed. When the primary product of an economy becomes as intangible and transitory as an opinion, maybe this is a moment at which to take stock.

I hope you have enjoyed this opinion...

[1] <https://wcfia.harvard.edu/publications/growth-time-debt>

[1] https://www.peri.umass.edu/fileadmin/pdf/working_papers/working_papers_301-350/WP322.pdf

[1] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780128137475000114>

[1] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468584417300119>

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/15/winds-can-carry-microplastics-anywhere-and-everywhere>