

When do you stop having an opinion?

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer at the Centre for Brexit Studies

Last week, we were fortunate to have had BBC 5 Live come along to the University for the day to discuss all things Brexit. Alongside Centre for Brexit Studies Director Alex de Ruyter, business figures were also interviewed for the broadcast and even the man who created the word we've all come to love and hate at the same time; Brexit. A selection of students also got involved, which was great to see and especially hear their opinions.

One opinion that has stayed in my mind since though, is that many of the students believe that their university lecturers are too open with their opinion when it comes to politics. I was very surprised to hear this, as it's not something that I **think** I picked up on whilst I was studying. I studied Journalism at university, so heated debates and discussions were very much expected from us, and probably even encouraged to an extent. I loved this side of my university course. I loved feeling like if I had a view to share, I could do so without feeling like others in the room would turn on me. However, is that just because we all had, in a roundabout way, the same view?

A few of the students who got involved in the broadcast were keen to express that they felt like they couldn't share their opinion, because it was different from their peers. Some, who support the Conservative Party, felt like it's not something they could 'admit' in front of others their age. Similarly, those who voted to leave the EU back in June 2016 also felt that they would be shunned by their friends for doing so. This completely shocked me, as back when I was at uni, we all discussed our views regularly. And that's when it hit me – I may have only graduated four years ago, but the political landscape was incredibly different then as it is to now. This was even before Brexit and before the idea of a vote. Before many young people really got involved in politics, and started questioning where they stand. It was a different UK back then; and it was only four years ago.

I went to university in Liverpool. And yes, of course it isn't the 'done thing' for students in Liverpool to announce that they are a Tory. I've always put this down to the deep rooted issues that the city faced with

the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s. In fact, in one of my first lectures, we were told just why the city do not support them, and I understood it straight away. I didn't believe that the lecturers were pushing us to think a certain way, I grasped that it was information that we needed to know as student journalists in the city. Of course, there are Tory voters in the city, I was friends with a handful in my four years in Liverpool. However, there are five MPs in Liverpool – and none of them are from the Conservative Party. I believe that many of my lecturers lived in and around the city, and I think it would have been wrong of me to expect them not to share their views with us in the lecture hall – they're only humans, right?

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But at what point do we stop sharing our opinion? Is it an age thing? A career thing? I ask this because I see and feel it all the time. Even just a few years ago, before I entered 'the real working world', I would have been the first to get involved in a political debate. So would many of my friends, and others my age. But as I've got older, essentially 'grown up', and started working in a variety of different environments, I've noticed that we all get a little squeamish when it comes to sharing our political opinion. It's simply, a lot like being a Tory in Liverpool, not the 'done thing' to argue with your colleagues, friends or family about politics, the older you get. But I also think it comes down to your environment more than anything. If you're working in a profession where you must appear unbiased, why would you risk it all? Why would you risk falling out with your friends or family about something that ultimately, none of you can really change?

As a student, I wasn't aware of the risks there were of having an opinion, and didn't think it would affect my life as such. So what if I fell out with a friend or peer? They'll get over it, right? Well, I've learned it doesn't quite work like that.

Yes, I still have opinions, of course, but I'll say them in the comfort of my home where I know those around me agree with me, where I'm not going to risk my career, my 'personal brand', or my dignity. You see, what I have realised is that we're all influencers. Forget about the reality stars on Instagram flogging teeth whitening products and diet pills, even a standard 9-5 working person could share their political view in a Tweet, and it could influence the way another person looks

at a situation, or even votes. Is it wrong for university lecturers and academics to share their opinion, and are they really trying to influence their students? Aren't we all just being influenced all day every day anyway, so why does it really matter who and what shares their views?

It is a subject that endlessly fascinates me, because in my world, I have two sets of people. Those who share their opinion regardless of the consequences, and those who simply don't. It is the same with the Brexit debate; you have those shouting their views at the roaming reporter on the news, and you have those who would run away if they got a glimpse of a TV van. I fear that we could be missing out on the opinion of incredible people, because they wouldn't dare 'risk it' to share their view. If all our decisions are made from what we have been influenced by, especially by those who aren't afraid to share their opinion, then why do so many of us stop sharing our views? Is it because we don't want to get in trouble at work or fall out with friends, or is it because many of us accepted a long time ago that there was little we could do to change politics, so why bother?

Think back to your 'younger' self, at what point did you 'tone it down'?