

What did we vote for?

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Recent news that MPs have collectively benefited from some £2 million of paid-for overseas trips^[1] leads to interesting questions over power, influence and our democracy. By far the leading destination was Israel and the Palestinian territories, most commonly (but not exclusively) paid for by pressure groups such as Conservative Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Israel. Large numbers also attended events in Europe, China the Middle East and the USA, in some cases paid for by the governments in question.

From the perspective of Brexit, this raises interesting questions about the direction in which future UK policy is likely to move and how closely the political views of those with power mirror those of the country they represent. In this context, recent visits by Michael Gove, Sajid Javid and Boris Johnson to the American Enterprise Institute are particularly noteworthy given their influence over substantial sections of the governing Conservative Party.

In the event that the UK fully leaves the EU's Single Market (and, of course, a so-called "no-deal" Brexit next March would do that by definition), it will be free to diverge from EU standards in a wide variety of areas. In spite of the rhetoric that these would merely be "different" from current EU standards, it is difficult to see how such a move would be anything other than a move towards an "American model" in which standards are set below their present level.

Alongside a competitive environment in which taxes were reduced, it seems likely that this would also involve lower tariffs in exchange for standards that were commensurately lower than their present level. These would presumably be enforced via bilateral trade and investment treaties, following arbitration procedures similar to those currently in place in trade agreements between the US and many other partners. Needless to say, such procedures are typically significantly more opaque than the system of justice overseen by the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Whether such a direction is desirable or not is, of course, open to question and interpretation. The more pressing issue is whether it accurately reflects the will of those who voted to leave the EU. Whilst "Leavers" are every bit as much of a disparate group as "Remainers", recent research^[2] does draw out some particular themes. Not least, many Leavers appear to be particularly concentrated in areas of the country that have been hard-hit by de-industrialisation^[3]. It is far from clear that groups in spaces that have been "left behind" by recent progress are likely to find a move towards an environment in which chlorinated chicken becomes widely available to be appealing.

Indeed, recent research has found that such areas are likely to be particularly exposed to any move away from trade with the EU^[4]. Finally, any moves to jettison the EU's "precautionary principle" are unlikely to find favour with an electorate used to unusually stringent standards around food, labelling, chemicals and many others. To conclude, whilst there is no indication of any wrongdoing on the part of MPs who have conducted recent paid-for visits to right wing US think-tanks, it is unclear whether the policies they support are, in fact, those the majority of the country believed they were voting for in 2016.

References

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