

The Brexit experience — evidence, expertise, and post-truth politics

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Abstract

In this brief talk, Wilsdon explores, first, what happened in 2016 and why; second, what Brexit tells us about the relationship between evidence, expertise and policy; third, is this the beginning of the end of UK evidence-informed decision-making; and, fourth, what are the prospects for evidence and expertise in post-Brexit Britain?

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the UK has built up a strong reputation for the quality of its scientific advisory system, as exemplified by its network of scientific advisers in almost every department of government and by its willingness to experiment and innovate with new approaches to evidence-based policy making. Its early adoption of “nudge” approaches to behaviour change and What Works evidence centres being two recent examples.¹

What happened in 2016?

But this seemingly progressive arc towards the ever-greater uptake of evidence and expertise in decision-making took a major knock in June 2016 with the result of the referendum on UK membership of the European Union swinging narrowly, 52% to 48%, in favour of Brexit. This was despite a mountain of evidence and the near unanimous support of experts of all kinds for remaining in the EU. Long lists of business leaders,

economists and scientists all argued for the UK to remain in the EU.

The referendum process itself was marred by exaggeration and the use of dubious facts and figures on both sides, but particularly by the Leave campaign, and by accusations of outside interference in the democratic process by a range of murky and unaccountable actors, including the Russian government. More evidence on the scale of this interference is coming to light on a daily basis, with clear parallels to aspects of the 2016 US Presidential election. But were the activities of Russian Twitter trolls enough to swing the outcome? This seems less likely and we also know a lot about the underlying economic and social insecurities, dislocations and inequalities that gave rise to the 52% vote for Brexit.

Concern about mass migration, post-financial-crisis austerity, combined with more inchoate desires to strengthen UK sovereignty and “take back control,” all played their part. As opinion polling shows, what the vote highlighted more than anything was two very different value sets held by almost equal proportions of the UK public. It was

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>;
<https://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

possible to predict whether voters would go for leave or remain based on their background views about the value of multiculturalism, social liberalism and feminism. The older you were, the more likely you were to vote for Brexit. The more educated you were, the more likely you were to vote for remain.

The relationship between evidence, expertise and policy

Another striking feature of the EU referendum campaign was the prominence it gave (unusual in mainstream British politics) to a critical stance on the value and legitimacy of evidence and expertise, most notably in the now infamous remark by Government Minister Michael Gove that people have had “enough of experts”. To be fair to Michael Gove, the full version of his quote was a bit more nuanced: “I think the people of this country have had enough of experts, from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong.” Nonetheless, his remarks were seen by many, particularly in academia, as a sign that something had shifted in the British body politic, that this was more than just an ongoing and gradual decline in deference to authority; it was more visceral, more angry.

Other episodes in recent months have heightened such concerns. For example, the reactions back in January 2017 by British newspapers to a ruling by the Supreme Court that Parliament needed to vote before triggering the Article 50 clause that initiates the process of leaving the EU. Even in the tabloid press, it’s been alarming to see senior judges and MPs branded enemies of the people simply for doing their job.

So is this all a sign of a new “post-truth politics” that we inhabit? This has been the topic of numerous books in recent months

by academics, journalists and political commentators. In some ways, things have changed. The combination of vested interests, whether Moscow or Murdoch, the echo chamber effects of social media, powerful yet unaccountable algorithms all pose significant challenges for the operation of liberal, evidence-informed democracy.

But while “post-truth” was the word of the year in 2016, it is hardly a new problem. Politics has always had a relationship of convenience with empirical reality, and science was never pure, as the historian of science, Stephen Shapin reminds us (Shapin 2010). What Brexit and Trump have jolted is not the status of truth, but the assumption that liberal, rational, cosmopolitan democracies, informed by relevant evidence, will lead a majority to options that appear self-evidently preferable to those who have benefited from that same liberal, rational, cosmopolitan order (EU membership being an obvious example).

But the alternative truths experienced by many in our society, especially in socioeconomic terms, are very different. So, while assumptions of a rising tide of evidence-informed decision-making in the UK have taken a knock, I think this is less a crisis of truth or of expertise and more a crisis of democracy. In seeking to renew the legitimacy of expertise and scientific advice, our starting point should not be to dismiss populist movements or reassert the self-evident superiority of rational decision-making. We need instead to start by repairing our democratic institutions and the cultures that support them. Part of this requires greater humility on the part of scientists and experts, acknowledging that we as a community have too often uncritically aligned ourselves with the winners at the expense of the losers, as

a prescient piece by Colin Macilwain in *Nature* argued six months before Trump was elected (Macilwain 2016).

Returning to the Michael Gove quote, for many people, the idea that expert views align with their interests or reflect their own experience is highly debatable. In Newcastle just before the referendum, a Kings College London professor invoked the views of leading economists before inviting the audience to imagine the likely plunge in UK gross domestic product after Brexit. Back yelled the woman: “That’s your bloody GDP, not ours.” Her brutally simple criticism has a point and populist politicians or social media warriors can too easily tap into these anxieties caused by globalisation and rising inequalities and channel them towards resentment.

The beginning of the end of UK evidence-informed decision-making?

But we shouldn’t despair. In the UK, as in Australia and elsewhere, evidence and expertise are being sought with growing urgency across a proliferating array of policy and public questions. At the same time and often on the same issues, the legitimacy of evidence and expertise has rarely been so fiercely contested, the Brexit referendum being an acute case in point. Paradox coexists with the possibility of evidence-formed decision-making. We need to better understand what lies behind the former and forge alliances to advance the latter. This is why the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA²) was set up.

Operating under the auspices of the International Council of Science, ICSU, the INGSA’s membership now includes almost 5000 practitioners, academics, knowledge

brokers and policy makers. Its focus is on assisting the development of effective advisory systems and the individual skills and institutional capacities that these require, irrespective of particular structural arrangements, through workshops, conferences and a growing catalogue of case studies and other guidance.

In delivering Brexit, decoupling structures for scientific and technical advice can at first glance seem deceptively simple. In many areas, UK institutions map onto EU counterparts, the UK Food Standards Agency coexists with the European Food and Safety Authority. The European Medicines Agency coexists with the UK medicines and healthcare products regulatory agency. Why not shift responsibility from Brussels to London and let us Brits get on with the job? However, as I argued in this *Nature* piece (Wilsdon 2017), the difficulty is that UK and EU networks of expertise, guidance and oversight are complementary and have developed in tandem over many years. Generations of British scientists and experts have shaped EU frameworks and vice versa. Around every issue that is codified in law or regulation, there exists a softer sphere of influence, information exchange and standard setting.

So, in animal health, the European Food Safety Authority plays an important role in coordinating data and evidence about emerging livestock diseases. The UK benefits from being part of a network of EU reference laboratories which coordinate surveillance, risk assessment and epidemiology on a range of transboundary diseases, such as avian flu. The Food Standard Authority has drawn heavily on the European Agency’s meta-analyses and sophisticated protocols around risk and uncertainty.

² <http://www.ingsa.org>

In the life sciences, the UK's 3% share of the global pharmaceutical market is dwarfed by the EU's 25%. This brings significant benefits from regulatory harmonisation through the European Medicines Agency. If EMA licensing was no longer to apply, the association of the British pharmaceutical industry warns of a delay for up to a year in British patients looking to access innovative treatment.

Finally, turning to environmental protection, a recent inquiry by the UK Environmental Audit Committee estimates that up to a third of EU legislation will be difficult to transpose into UK law and those protections for wildlife, for habitats, for biodiversity that can be transferred will then be detached from the underpinning sources of expert advice, no longer updated, with no UK body to enforce them. Over time, the UK can build up new advisory and regulatory capacity, but this won't be quick or easy.

So, as a community, committed to strengthening evidence-informed decision-making, we need simultaneously to work on the structural, social and political dimensions of the problem, to rebuild and develop new capacity at the evidence–policy interface, but also to address the underlying causes of disaffection with experts. Drawing on the latest “evidence of evidence use,” of which this review is a good example (Langer et al., 2016), can steer us towards what we in the INGSA network like to call the science and art of scientific advice.

Providing scientific advice in a reflective way that requires learning from mistakes, and is humble in the way it makes its case often requires a shift from scientific advice to knowledge brokering. Brokering requires persistent interaction with decision-makers and their context. Brokering necessitates

diversity of perspectives: epistemic, institutional and cultural diversity, diversity in disciplines, in methods, in mechanisms, in sectors and institutions, in experiences, ideologies, background, culture and so forth. Brokering means keeping it complex; there is no single privileged view of a complex problem and, finally, brokering means providing multiple alternatives. Given uncertainties and diversity of knowledge and values, there are usually multiple plausible pathways into the future and choosing amongst them is inherently political. There is a strong focus on experimentation and learning in this approach to scientific advice.

Evidence and expertise in post-Brexit Britain

So, can Brexit become for the UK, or indeed Trump for the US, less a moment of undoing or unravelling of all that has been achieved, and instead a point of disruption from which we pause, learn and regroup? In a thoughtful new paper, the Science and Technology Studies scholars Sheila Jasanoff and Hilton Simmet (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017) make this cautiously positive case, asking whether “the post-truth moment can be reframed as a moment of revelation that neither facts nor values can stand alone in a government founded on the principles of truthfulness and inclusive public debate.” They suggest that: “without renewed attention to the norms that shape the practises of public science and public reason, it would not be possible to guide fortune’s wheel expertly along the arc of justice.”

On a bad day, of which there are too many right now in British public and political life, the views I’ve just presented may come across and naïve, as wishful thinking. But much as I lament the result of the EU referendum and wish it could be halted or reversed, I also

refuse to believe it is the death of democracy or the beginning of the end of evidence-informed decision-making. That story still has many chapters to be written.

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