What is the meaning of Brexit?

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See also: F Gannon (September 2016) and F Colucci (September 2016)

In the UK referendum on 23 June 2016 the British electorate delivered a majority vote in favour of leaving the EU. The margin was small—52 to 48%—but the result was clear. Since then, nothing has been clear.

The roiling waters of UK politics have delivered a new Prime Minister, Theresa May, and a new conservative government, but the flow of events remains turbulent. Amid the ongoing confusion over exactly how the referendum result will reconfigure Britain’s relationship with the EU—which looks likely to stretch well beyond 2017—it is difficult to judge the impact on the future of UK and European science. The PM’s announcement that “Brexit means Brexit” may have relieved the leavers in her party, but has done little to reassure anyone else. Her new Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, is confident that a “balance can be struck” between access to the single market and freedom of movement, but has yet to win the confidence of Paris or Berlin. Boris’s soberer younger brother, Jo Johnson, has been re-appointed as Minister for Universities and Science, providing a degree of continuity. He has made reassuring noises in the aftermath of the referendum, but his refusal to answer questions on Brexit at the recent ESOF 2016 meeting in Manchester was a disappointment.

During the referendum campaign, the pro-Brexit lobby group Scientists for Britain confidently asserted the UK could enjoy full access to the EU research ecosystem as an associated state rather than a full member, just like Norway or Switzerland. Unfortunately, this is as fanciful as Johnson’s “pro having my cake and pro eating it” policy on the EU. It overlooks the crucial fact that the Norwegians and Swiss have access only by adhering to EU rules on freedom of movement. Switzerland will lose these privileges if it does not reverse a 2014 vote to limit mass immigration by the end of this year [1]. Nor should it be forgotten that Norway and Switzerland also have to pay the same contributions as EU members, yet have no say on EU research policy. Britain can hardly expect to play by different rules.

And nor is it likely to be able to sell freedom of movement pledges to the UK electorate, since immigration was such a hot topic in the referendum. Research by the Resolution Foundation [2] showed that it was an especially influential issue among voters in regions where immigration has surged in recent years even if the size of the local immigrant population remained low. It matters little that there is no evidence that immigration from the EU or elsewhere has taken jobs—the UK currently has more or less full employment—or significantly depressed wages [3]. The roots of these feelings are more visceral, and they have been exacerbated by the unequal spread of measures to lift the economy out of recession. But they have to be taken on board if the scientific community wants to make a case for finding a settlement that leaves it enmeshed in EU research programmes.

The UK is a scientific powerhouse [4], and it is likely to remain strong whatever the eventual agreement reached with the EU. But there is little doubt that leaving the organisation poses a significant threat to the vitality of research in Britain. During Framework Programme 7 from 2007 to 2013, the UK contributed 5.4 billion Euro to the EU’s research budget, but won 8.8 billion Euro in research awards [5]. Unless we can negotiate associate state status (which seems politically unlikely), we will lose access to EU funds that currently make up about 10% of UK university research income. In theory, this could be replaced by savings made on Britain’s EU membership fees, but in practice, the gloomy economic prognostications following Brexit make this unlikely. Even if funding levels are maintained, a looser association with the EU will probably cost UK-based researchers valuable leadership roles in EU projects. British-based researchers currently coordinate over 20% of all Horizon 2020 projects, the most of any EU nation and a reflection of UK prowess in winning funding [6]. Although we are still a full member, there are already reports of UK scientists being asked to take a backseat in EU funding applications, or to step off altogether [7]. This is the same loss of confidence that Swiss researchers reported in after 2014 [1].

Then there is the impact of the referendum on EU nationals currently working in the UK research ecosystem. For those who have not yet clocked up five years in the UK, their future residency status—and that of their families—is uncertain. But even established European colleagues have spoken to me of sensing a less welcoming climate amid the rancour of the referendum campaign. Britain risks leakage of a valuable pool of scientific talent. And of course, exit from the EU may well restrict UK researchers’ access to training opportunities provided through Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions and to infrastructure programs such as Elixir.

What is to be done? For the scientific community, the most immediate task is to convince our political masters of the need for damage limitation. The case to be made has to be hard-nosed, evidence-based, constructive and forward-looking. The curiosity and passion that fires our research has to be brought to bear on engaging positively with the government.

From the British perspective, a first request should be for a commitment to underwrite UK applications to Horizon 2020 in projects that may outlast the country’s EU membership. That will forestall a planning
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Blight on current grant proposals. Next would be to seek firm reassurance on the residency rights of EU nationals working in the UK. This will be difficult since there is little prospect of any commitment to broad-based freedom of movement, but there is a strong case to be made on behalf of all those staff—researchers, technicians and administrators—who keep the machinery of science running.

The UK scientific community has to make its case not just to politicians but to the public at large. We should try to avoid charges of elitism, or of being out of tune with post-referendum political realities. We need to be aware that many other employment sectors will want to make similar defences for worker mobility. We should be sensitive to the possibility of coming across as money-grubbing and self-serving.

We might justifiably point to the importance and economic value of maintaining the UK’s reputation for world-class science—something that will be hard to rebuild once lost in an ever more competitive world. And we might argue that that reputation has been built with the input of our international colleagues and with collaborations forged as we moved easily from laboratory to laboratory around Europe and beyond. But that world is unrecognizable to many who voted to leave. For them, any economic or scientific problems of Brexit are a price worth paying for “taking back control”, a viewpoint that should give us pause before getting stuck into the debate. The referendum result is a reminder to check our privilege because, like some of the more enthusiastic Eurocrats, we seem to have left a large part of the population behind. That is not a healthy situation for the research community.

The debate will not be easy. My experience so far on social media is that it is hard to make any criticism about the likely fallout of Brexit without being dubbed a “whinger” or a “bad loser” or worse. An angry campaign has morphed into an ill-tempered phoney war that looks set to endure right up to the moment Article 50 is invoked. We can draw strength from the friendship and common understanding that are part of the universal language of science, something I felt very powerfully when talking with young scientists at a meeting of Spanish Researchers in the UK in the week following the referendum. But we have to speak out beyond our Eurocentric comfort bubble to those people who are celebrating the prospect of Britain’s detachment from the EU.

We cannot expect to win every argument, or even to converse on our own terms. There are difficult conversations to be had about hard-to-define notions of sovereignty, democracy and identity. A good place to start will be to highlight specific examples showing how research benefits all people’s lives—in terms of new technologies, new medicines or new forms of agriculture, for example—though just as important will be to listen. From there perhaps, we can begin to talk about how research works best when funding, training and employment opportunities are integrated and coordinated on a European scale—and the particular advantages of EU mechanisms. In the longer term, we need to do more to diversify entry into universities and research, by reaching out to students in lower socio-economic and other under-represented groups. And we should harness more of the energy of citizen scientists.

These are difficult undertakings—though some are already in train as part of the open science agenda—but for the sake of science and for the sake of society, we have to try. Because the referendum result has taken the UK and the EU into entirely uncharted territory, and the shape of the new settlement is still in play.

References