



THE VIEW
RICHARD HARRIS

BACK TO BUSINESS

Brexit all lies and emotion

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By some accident of history, I find myself able to vote in Britain's Brexit referendum. I am ambivalent. Do I stay or do I go?

I want facts; but every source of information in our digital world is owned by someone with their own version of the truth. Who can you trust? As a geology graduate, I am in favour of fracking – or maybe not. The veracity of advice, whether on geology, restaurants, travel or a smartwatch purchase, is pretty dubious.

At least as an economist, I can go back to the raw data and weigh, filter, sort and calculate for myself.

It is quite clear that both sides are telling porkies (pork pies = lies); the "Leave" side more emotional than the "Remain". So, for most, the referendum will be decided not by research and rational thought, but with the gut – justified by deliberate, soundbitten half-truths. Are you a post-Empire codger with a view of how great Britain used to be or a wild-eyed compromiser exploiting a future world?

I voted for Britain to remain within the European Union – the first time, a long 41 years ago. The union, helped by former prime minister Margaret Thatcher's reforms, has been wildly successful, driven by competition and upgrading. European regional financial aid has transformed infra-



Boris Johnson

structure in places like Wales. But at what price?

Sticky fingers abound where money is transferred and battles against profligacy and inefficiency are inevitable; think FIFA or the Olympic Committee. A whole European Commission under former president Jacques Santer resigned en masse in 1999 because of audit improprieties.

And having a supranational entity making regulations on health, safety, quality and the movement of people to find work can compromise national sovereignty. The European Courts are used to extending lost immigration issues that a sovereign judiciary could quash in an instant.

I do not appreciate a bunch of hairy foreigners developing remote, foreign, pettifogging and nitpicking rules for my behaviour. They are irritating but they are not

sovereignty-busting. The majority of them would have been enacted anyway.

In the absence of fact, arguments become emotional. One of the "Leavers", John Redwood, talks about Britain "getting its own laws back" and "being able to use our own money". I checked the facts. Using his inflated figures, the cost of the EU is just 1 per cent of total British spending. Far from building hundreds of top hospitals, it would just cover a week of the domestic welfare bill.

Britain may be the fifth-largest world economy but it is a paltry 3.7 per cent of global gross domestic product. The world is no longer run by brains, but by brawn and blocs like China, Europe, Russia and the United States. Britain could soon lose its place at the G7 table as large population countries like India and Indonesia overtake.

Few independent observers thought the Scottish economy could survive outside Britain – a view that the halved oil price has proved correct. Forget about new trade deals with Australia, China, and the US; not interested, back of the queue.

To me, the immigrant experience has been very positive as they fix houses, wash shirts and clean toilets that the welfare-sodden youth and elderly of Europe do not. It is a stretch to blame

young, hardworking, ambitious, healthy migrants for clogging up the National Health Service.

Statistics aside, the tipping point for me was when popular politician Boris Johnson opportunistically switched to the Leave camp – the pound collapsed and is now down about 7 per cent on the referendum. The Invisible Hand of the market forecasts out-comes a lot better than the vox pop.

It is blindingly obvious that traders love blood in the water and will ravage an isolated Britain like roast beef thrown to a shoal of piranhas. Concerns about inflation, employment, interest rates and property prices are real.

Many do not understand sovereignty. Britain compromised that in joining the UN and Nato. Sovereignty is not given; it is something you take – and it can be taken back by periodically saying "No". That may indeed be against European Law – but is that not the very definition of sovereignty?

In Hong Kong, we have an absolute sovereign in the Chinese Communist Party. How we handle our discontents, based largely on Hong Kong's unique culture and background, will be through negotiation mechanisms with the sovereign – but ultimately we cannot say "No".

The Brexit vote itself proves that Britain is sovereign. In the best interests of Britain, I shall vote Remain.

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Illustration: Dennis Wong