

Parting shot

A WELL-FUNCTIONING BUREAUCRACY, free of corruption, and with dedicated civil servants, is a blessing for any country. The UK can call itself lucky to have such well-trained civil servants. In fact, members of the UK's Government Economic Service (GES) have been trained at Warwick and other top Economics departments across the UK. In my encounters with members of the GES, I have always been impressed with their training, and with their dedication to do the best for their country.

The Brexit Referendum has brought up deep divisions in UK society. As detailed CAGE research on the voting pattern has shown, exposure to the EU in terms of immigration and trade provides relatively little explanatory power for the referendum vote. Instead, fundamental characteristics of the voting population were key drivers of the Vote Leave share, in particular their education profiles, their historical dependence on manufacturing employment as well as low income and high unemployment. In short, deep economic factors played a more important role than issues that are directly linked to European issues.

Does Brexit help to address those economic issues? As Nick Crafts, the CAGE Director, likes to say: "There is not a single question to which Brexit is the answer."

How does that relate to our civil service? The answer is bandwidth. Even the best civil servants can only deal with a limited number of issues at the same time. Right now, Brexit preparations take up an amazing part of the bandwidth of the UK's civil service. I was not able to stop my wife from stocking up on food supplies ("think about the kids"), in case the



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UK really ends up without a deal. Buying huge numbers of extra boxes of durable foods like pasta is only jamming space in our house in the short run, but we can eat them later in the year, so not much is lost. However, the government's no-deal Brexit preparations are taking up billions of taxpayers money and so much bandwidth that normal government business makes less progress than would be necessary to heal the divisions that led to the Brexit vote in the first place.

It would be naïve to think that the UK can return to business as usual any time soon. No deal might lead to chaos, an extension to article 50 might lead to further agony over which way to go. Even the best-case scenario of an orderly exit on 29 March 2019 is just one step on a long journey in which the UK continues its soul-searching. In the meantime, many brilliant civil servants serve as firemen instead of leading on ways to make the UK a beacon of efficiency in solving societal issues.

But maybe there is a silver lining: might dedicated civil servants, paired with research expertise (remember all those experts that no one needs) helping to understand the Brexit result, pave a way forward?

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