Got Brexit done?

by Chris Willmott, Science Editor

Publishing a magazine, especially one made available in printed format, inevitably involves deadlines. In consequence, this editorial is being written in mid-December, with the outcome of the recent UK General Election front and central in my mind. Given the majority achieved by the Conservatives, and the emphasis placed on their intention to “Get Brexit Done”, I have every expectation that, as you read this, the UK will have left the European Union and entered an eleven month transition period. This will be unsettling times for everyone. Leading molecular scientists such as Nobel laureates Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Venki Ramakrishnan have been sounding the alarm regarding the potential impacts of Brexit upon the science community for some while. Although the UK will leave the EU with the negotiated withdrawal agreement in place, there remains concern of a ‘No deal’ Brexit at the end of 2020, with the Government pledged to stick to the advertised schedule (to promote ‘trust’ in politics).

As we are all aware, contemporary science is an increasingly collaborative venture. Exclusion from both funding and vibrant networks with Europe is a principal worry. The government has promised to cover shortfalls in Horizon 2020 support although, as Nurse notes, this is one of a plethora of pledges made in recent months. Although the current science minister has previously expressed the intention of the UK Government to seek association with Horizon Europe, this is by no means a certainty. The terms for 3rd party association are yet to be determined by the European Commission and, as the UK will be paying into the scheme, power may lie in the value that the Treasury sees in participation.

The second direct impact of Brexit concerns the freedom of movement of scientists into and out of the UK. Many of us will already be able to cite examples of European colleagues who left UK science since the 2016 referendum result and uncertainty regarding immigration status (and/or expenses) now that leaving the EU has been activated will surely encourage more to go and disincentivise further movement to work here.

To my mind, however, the recent election has also identified an additional concern for science, and this time beyond the confines of the UK. The slippery treatments of factual information by politicians, and moreso the public’s apparent willingness to turn a blind eye to known untruths and misinformation (provided the perpetrator has a charismatic persona or is selling a product they prize more greatly) ought to stir broader alarm. Our scientific endeavours are built upon the importance of honest conveyance of data which is, to the best of our knowledge, the accurate outputs of carefully conducted experiments. The loss of importance of ‘facts’ demonstrated in the UK election echoes trends we have seen in other parts of the world in recent times. There is clearly work to be done, and done urgently, in order to redress this trend.

The Royal Society has produced a fact-sheet on the dangers posed by a ‘No deal’ (see https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2019/no-deal-factsheet-for-international-science.pdf).