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Scientists should not resign themselves to Brexit

Leaving the European Union is not yet a done deal, and UK researchers must look past a pay-off and take a stand, says Colin Macilwain.

With the arrogance expected of a governing class born to power, the British government has tried to buy off academic opposition to Brexit by showering institutions with cash.

But this straightforward manoeuvre — dropping an extra £2 billion (US\$2.5 billion) into the nation's science budget to quieten criticism and shore up a weak political position — shouldn't fool anyone.

Instead, researchers, together with other groups threatened by Brexit, should fight to keep a foothold in the European Union. The outlook may be discouraging — opposition disarray makes it tough to rally the 48% of voters who opposed Brexit — but there's still everything to play for.

Prime Minister Theresa May has pledged to invoke the two-year process for Britain to leave the EU by the end of March, and if she does, then the phony back-and-forth over whether Brexit will be 'hard' or 'soft' will be over.

As the specific, very harsh terms under which Britain would leave come to light, the coalition supporting it will surely fragment — presenting opportunities for those, such as scientists, who stand to lose the most. Make no mistake, the end of free movement and a bumpy exit from EU research programmes will blow holes in the culture of British academic science that devalued pound notes cannot fill.

Last summer, just after the 23 June Brexit vote, leaders of Britain's scientific community set out three distinct responses to the vote.

One was: offer to sell out for more money. This was best articulated by Jürgen Maier, chief executive of Siemens UK, who told the EuroScience Open Forum meeting in Manchester in July that the community should pitch up at the Treasury and name its price.

The second view, rather more popular at the time, was voiced by Anne Glover, former chief scientific adviser to the president of the European Commission, and Luke Georghiou, vice-president for research at the University of Manchester and one of Britain's most prominent science-policy academics. They held that scientists should continue to fight to overturn the vote by any means necessary. "We're far too well-behaved," Glover told the meeting.

The third view, most restrained and, therefore, most difficult to execute, was put forward at a Science|Business meeting in Brussels in October by Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust. Wellcome has a lot to lose: the new, £700-million Crick Institute that it has helped to build in central London had expected to gain a large chunk of its sustenance from participation in EU projects.

Farrar, responding to increasingly vociferous exchanges between British and EU representatives at the meeting, called for a period of calm reflection while people work out what might realistically be negotiated on scientific support post-Brexit. He made his plea more in hope than expectation.

But the government's 23 November budget statement demonstrated that it is the first of these three positions that has been making the running.

British scientists wouldn't be the first to be asked to accept such a trade-off, and they won't be the last. If the past is any guide, I expect the new Republican Congress and the administration of Donald Trump in the United States to offer cash to major agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, even if they pursue strongly anti-science agendas regarding public health and the environment.

The £2 billion promised annually to UK scientists by 2020 is subject to an extensive reform of British research funding, which would subjugate the research councils and abolish the royal charters of individual universities. This, according to the mandarins at the Treasury — the same ones whose dominance of public policy has steadily stripped Britain of a coherent approach to science, technology and industry since the Second World War — is now the way forward.

It might be the way forward for the Conservative Party. But it is a poor prognosis for UK science, which has until now been the main beneficiary of the emerging European Research Area, drawing the most talented students and staff from all over Europe, winning the lion's share of grants from the European Research Council and, according to figures released last month by the European University Association, coordinating 20% of projects for the Horizon 2020 research programme.

It is true that some British universities will always remain strong international players, but there's a rueful atmosphere on many campuses as

we head into 2017. The University of Cambridge told the Commons education committee last month that it expects EU student intake to collapse by two-thirds after Brexit. That is only the half of it: the mood in science departments is universally grim. It isn't just EU-born students, postdocs and staff who are unsettled: countless spouses and offspring feel dejected and unwanted in the United Kingdom, too.

The challenge for the scientific community is to keep searching for a route that will keep Britain very much in Europe, where it belongs, and forestall its drift towards becoming some kind of mid-Atlantic Singapore.

The political opportunities look narrow right now. But the loose coalition of dissenters, doubters and right-wing jackals who voted to leave Europe can still be broken up. Chances aplenty will arise as soon as May starts to negotiate a deal that is sure to anger or disappoint many of these voters. The scientific community may be close to despair right now. But it must not take this rout lying down. ■

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