

KAREN FOLEY: Good morning and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. This session is about expert knowledge and conspiracy theory. And this is part of that event for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Understanding Brexit.

I'm joined by Alan Shipman and David Robinson. Welcome. And what we're going to talk about today is why expert opinions and arguments were so roundly rejected during the referendum, and why it's so hard to get a firm answer on some of these basic questions, like whether Brexit will make us better off or strengthen our sovereignty.

So, we've got two very different takes on this matter. And Alan, you've been spending many years working on economic forecasts, I'm hoping that you're going to fill us in and give us some information. And David is from religious studies, and you've been doing a lot of work on conspiracy theories as well. So we're going to have a very interesting discussion on this whole idea about experts, people at home who have been talking about social media, in particular for young people and how that can sometimes give diversity of opinions as well. Alan, fill us in then on this economic take on are we better or worse off.

ALAN SHIPMAN: Well of course, the European Union started out as the European Economic Community, and when people voted in the referendum, one thing they obviously wanted to know was, is Brexiting going to make us better or worse off? And they look to economists to provide that answer. And economists, being economists, can give a very clear answer which, I think we have a slide that illustrates that.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's take a look. So here's the GDP difference 15 years after Brexit. Talk us through the slide, Alan.

ALAN SHIPMAN: Well, as you can see, there's a slight diversity of opinion here.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, who are these people, then? Can you just explain what each of these aspects are looking at on the slide that we showed viewers at home.

ALAN SHIPMAN: Let's take them from left to right. EFT is Economists for Free Trade. Now, they were economists for Brexit. They've always seen the bright side of leaving the European Union.

KAREN FOLEY: As we can see there.

ALAN SHIPMAN: This is what they say, that on the most favourable assumption, after 15 years, you will be 4% better off-- that's the GDP change-- compared to staying in. The economy would grow, but it will grow by those additional points when we're liberated from the EU. That's actually a more optimistic forecast than the leave campaigners were tending to give us in the campaign. So that's more of the positive increment that you can see next to it, is the \$350 million a week on the side of the bus plus various other benefits that we were told might materialise outside the EU.

And then, you get the negative story. Global Future, a group of independent economists, who've looked at four different scenarios-- the different kinds of trade deal that we might get outside the EU-- and they're all negative. And in general, even on the more favourable assumption, you're going to be 2% worse off once we've left and once we've realigned our trade.

And then, of course, there's the Treasury, which has given us a range of forecasts over the last two or three years before and after the referendum. On the worst of these, you're going to be 8% worse off. And on other scenarios-- even with the bespoke trade deal that we're looking for-- It's not going to be terribly good, except that, obviously, the Treasury has come under a lot of pressure since the referendum results to give up project fear as was and perhaps reappraise things.

It's worth mentioning also that those best-case and worst-case scenarios, both used the Treasury model. What Economists for Free Trade have done is taken the Treasury model, disagreed with the assumptions that went into that, put what they say is more realistic assumptions into it, and that's how they get the positive increment. So a whole range of different forecasts-- some based on the same economic modelling. It's kind of not surprising that people tend to lose faith in what economists tell them.

It's worth saying also that the Treasury changed its model, and that's one of the reasons it has more favourable forecasts recently. They changed from a thing called the gravity model to the computable general equilibrium model. And that was under pressure from another group called Briefings for Brexit, who are actually a more left-leaning group of economists who feel it will be better off outside.

But the one change they didn't expect was from the gravity model, which they have criticised quite heavily to a computable general equilibrium model, which they criticise even more

heavily because they see it as completely the wrong way to approach the economy. So that's the broad measure of economic expertise. You can basically, if you're a politician, pick the answer you want-- positive or negative-- and, because of that range of acceptable opinion that comes out of the experts, unsurprisingly, people start to disagree with the economic experts.

But I think, not to blame it all on economists, we have seen a more general loss of faith in the authority of experts, a more general willingness to criticise any expertise from any discipline. And that's part of a wider social trend, I think. We don't accept automatically what we're told by people in authority. We do tend to criticise much more.

KAREN FOLEY: David, you would probably argue that the authority challenges are not just on an economic basis.

DAVID ROBINSON: Yeah, absolutely. These kinds of debates about challenges to experts and a broadening out of authority, that the fact is, we tend to think about these as either rejecting science or challenging science, but we got to remember that people don't always make decisions based on science. It's actually quite difficult to do that. And for most people, that's not how we make decisions.

Tradition plays an enormous part-- particularly in the political right-- but for everybody. We tend to, if something's not broke, don't fix it, kind of idea but also, sometimes supernatural ideas-- religion being the obvious case, but not the only one. And personal experience has become, in the last few decades, one of the major drivers of decision-making. It's maybe not surprising in a neoliberal economic system where we've stressed the role of the individual and the importance of your feelings, and your opinions, and yourself, and personal choice as a driver of the market, that opinion, that personal feelings-driven opinion has become a much bigger driver of public opinion.

KAREN FOLEY: And I guess, to some extent, we were all looking at Brexit in terms of what's going to happen in terms of my purse. How is this going to impact me economically? But also, Georgina and George were raising the point earlier that a lot of this is about who counts. What is the evidence? And there's also this issue, then, that you're trying to talk about, which is about the extent to which evidence is created, and evaluated, and on what basis? From what perspective?

DAVID ROBINSON: Right. Yeah. There's an epistemological issue. It's about how you know what you know. And science is a very reliable method, but it's quite a difficult method in that it's very specific. It has

limitations. And it's just simply not how most people make decisions. The biggest decisions of your life-- your partner or all sorts of things-- have got nothing to do with science. So we've got to remember that when we're trying to understand why aren't ordinary people basing this decision on science. That's part of the reason why.

KAREN FOLEY: But I guess one of the things that experts have been doing is giving us some of these facts, and they've been saying, well, this is a truth of some sort, so this scientific thing. And whereas, what you're saying is it's not just the facts but it's how you think about the facts, and how you're actually picking up that evidence and looking at it.

DAVID ROBINSON: Yeah. If you can't understand why a fact is a fact because you don't understand the science by which it's been produced, then you're accepting that on authority. It's not based on the science of it. So, when these issues of your personal experience maybe completely trump that, so the fact that what you're seeing in your village might be much more primary way of making that decision than simply taking the word of somebody who says that they have a better authority on this but you don't understand the reasons why.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's see what people at home said when we asked them about whose expertise they would trust. So here, we can see academics are at 50%. Friends and family are at 50%. No one's trusting any politicians and journalists. So that is a very interesting point. And we were talking as well about social media. But I'm just not sure whether-- do you have to be an expert to be an expert?

ALAN SHIPMAN: I think it's a good thing that people are willing to challenge expert opinion more than they used to. It's part of democratisation, it's part of giving people a voice, and not just taking things from people who've been made into authority figures. So that lack of respect for our politicians is, to a certain extent, a sign of social progress, something that's beneficial.

But there are some dangers in that. Science, including social science, to a certain extent, their self-criticality is part of the problem, that they will not give us absolute simple answers. They will say it's a complicated picture. We might be wrong. Going 15 years out, all sorts of other things can happen, so our prediction won't be that precise. And that's science being responsible. That's science saying, there are limits on how certain we can be.

But, of course, it may come across as less convincing than the very convinced person relying entirely on belief who says, absolutely, this is how it's going to be. And they can be very persuasive, rhetorically brilliant, in putting that forward but it's really based on opinion rather

than evidence. So the self-criticality of science-- the willingness to be wrong, the desire to put forward ideas that are refutable, that can be overthrown-- it's both a strength and weaknesses-- a strength when it comes to ultimately making the right choices but a weakness when it comes to persuading people about important decisions. And that is when they tend to go with their instincts-- the way they feel-- rather than being swayed entirely by the evidence.

And this issue about what you feel versus what the experts tell you does seem to become more of a gap. You can be told there's an economic recovery underway but if you're not feeling better off, you just don't believe that. Your own personal situation will tend to trump what you're told by someone in the distance who may be talking in general about the average, and none of this is the average.

So there are real issues, though, where it's good to have a public debate where people feel they're on the level with the experts. But to some extent, the experts are themselves inhibited by the principals, by their ethics, and that can mean sometimes they lose out to others who've got an ax to grind, who are just more persuasive.

KAREN FOLEY: People at home have been talking about what makes an expert an expert. Michelle.

MYCHELLE: It has been such a lively debate about objectivity, bias, how you draw a conclusion, how you can draw different conclusions from the same data, and people listening or not listening. Nicholas raises the point that, don't experts, like everyone else, have ideological, cultural, class, and other prejudice, which makes interpretation of empirical and other data skewed? I think Joan has some other points as well.

JOAN: Yeah. There's a really interesting one here coming from KIKADB. "For me, the experts invited in mainstream media discussions are usually public speakers of some kind rather than policy researchers." And the earlier discussion was, actually they're often not real experts, or people with biases. So she goes on to say, "As really most UK policies have been criticised by experts and policy makers continue running with some moral panic or precaution tangent."

MYCHELLE: So, it's been a really lively debate.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow. A lot going on there. Alan.

ALAN SHIPMAN: Yes. That does raise the question of who exactly is an expert, and are they people who are steeped in the research process, surrounded by the data, and constantly reviewing things? Or

are they actually people who are, in some ways, inter-mediating between that raw information, that intellectual expert opinion, and the public audience, which needs things put in more comprehensible terms?

And I think we have seen the advantage going towards-- I don't know it's still called this-- the people who used to be called the policy entrepreneurs, who know enough about the research and perhaps have done some of it to be aware of what's coming out of the behind-the-scenes experts, but they are very, very good at distilling it into the sound bites if necessary, the very short statements about what to do. And they can sell that to politicians and public audiences. And sometimes, in the background, the experts are protesting, no, that's not quite what we said. No, you spun it in a certain direction, please stop doing that.

But those who are acting as the intermediaries become the public face of the research, and they can actually, with a great deal of skill, get a political point out of it, which maybe the originators of the research didn't intend. So it's a complicated process where, yes, sometimes someone is on the media as an expert. Other experts might be saying, no, no, they're not quite getting it right. But they are the people who've made the breakthrough into generating the publicity, having the public platform.

KAREN FOLEY: And people do seem a lot more willing to challenge these ideas. There's also been this discussion about he who pays the piper, and to what extent people's motivation is driven by where they're positioned, et cetera, which leads quite nicely to this discussion again about who we can really trust. And people think, well, what is the Treasury doing? Saying things like this when we can see that other experts have these differences of opinions.

So, to what extent, David, then, do conspiracy theories and this idea about people questioning really authority in that sense, how does that then play out? And is that narrative really useful in terms of people trying to make sense of things?

DAVID
ROBINSON: Useful for whom? For the people who do it? Yes. It must be, otherwise they wouldn't do it. In some ways, the current vogue for conspiracy theorising is, it grows out of academic thought in a long way. It's in that sort of Marxist critical theory tradition of looking for people's biases and the hidden power structures that underlie the way that knowledge and society work. And in some senses, conspiracy theory is just a popularisation of that.

But it works very well, of course, as an explanation, particularly of failure. So we saw a lot of conspiracy theories being put forward by the leave faction prior to the election-- sorry, the

referendum. And it's obvious that that's now flipped to the remain campaign in the wake of the result. Although interestingly, you are still seeing conspiracy theories in the leave campaign about what's going to happen in the future-- this sort of prophecy idea. So conspiracy theories are a very good way of explaining events which in some way challenge the model of the world that you had, which is, of course, an entirely natural response.

What's quite interesting though, of course, is that as soon as a conspiracy theory is proven to be correct. It's no longer a conspiracy theory. So the usual trite thing of, well, conspiracy theories are just for losers because they're obviously all untrue, is true, but it's a sort of categorical trick because the moment it becomes true, it's no longer a conspiracy theory.

KAREN FOLEY: But also, so much of it depends on your position in terms of what you're prepared to believe. We cling to this idea of experts because we want to know. We want someone sensible to model something and say, OK, are we better off, give us a categorical answer.

But then this whole idea of belief really changes where we're at. It's like if you're poorly you don't normally believe in holistic medicine, et cetera, that's fine. You say, oh, that's a load of nonsense. But if that's your last opportunity, then your position might shift. You're the same person, that same space, and so this context is just everything. Is that why some of these things are flipping?

DAVID ROBINSON: Absolutely. The commonsense way of thinking about belief is these monolithic things which somehow exist outside of us and drive our behaviour, but the opposite is really true. Beliefs are much more malleable and situational than we tend to think.

The example you gave there is a very good one. If we are experiencing chronic pain, or something like that, and we've tried all of the conventional things, the fact that we don't believe in homoeopathy might go out the window. We suddenly look at it in the subjunctive mode of, well, maybe this might work. So you try it. And then, of course, if it does work, then that might change your entire way of thinking about things.

Another good example is astrology. Now, if you ask people, do you believe in astrology? Maybe 1% of people will agree that they do. If you say, do you read your horoscope? That goes up to like 6% or 7%. But if you ask, have you looked up whether you and your new partner are compatible? You're up to like 25%, 30%. So the idea of there being, do you believe in astrology having any correlation to the way that people use it or whether they're using or not, it's much more complicated situation than we expect.

So in the turbulent economic, social situation that we're in now, people may be looking for different explanations or willing to entertain different explanations, different possibilities, than they would have in other times. So the underlying beliefs maybe are not driving behaviour as much as behaviour and situations are driving beliefs.

ALAN SHIPMAN: That does seem to raise two dangers though. Sometimes, if expert opinion is a variant-- is all over the place, as it has been with those economic forecasts-- then it opens up the space for someone to come in who just rejects all of that and thinks of a number and says, believe in that. But also, sometimes you get a situation where there is a consensus among the experts. And then someone else can come along and make a virtue of the fact that they're defying the experts, especially if the experts are gloomy.

And you come along and say, there is a conspiracy there, a project fear which we need to defy, and we can have this optimistic alternative vision. And suddenly, that can become very persuasive because you are the sort of brave figure who is battling the consensus. Even if, actually, there's a good reason for that consensus, the majority might be right.

And I think we've certainly seen both those things playing out politically at the moment-- sometimes precisely because all the experts are on one side. Popularity swings towards the apparently brave figure who is standing up for the alternative, and who can then condemn the experts for basically having a vested interest in what they're saying, being part of a deep state, being the people who are trying to hold back progress because they're all saying you can't do this.

And it ultimately swings support behind going ahead and doing it because that seems to be the brave way to defy what might be a reactionary consensus. And we have seen politicians making use of that, and it has had quite extraordinary political impact-- with Brexit, with what's happened in the United States. And I think one needs to stand back from that and ask, to a certain extent, are we sweeping the experts aside too lightly here? Isn't there sometimes a situation where they were all saying one thing because that's likely to be the correct thing?

KAREN FOLEY: Because they can swing. And I'd like to end, if we may, Alan, on your slide, which is about the loss of percentages. So looking at NHS spending, which again, was one of those key emotive drivers.

ALAN SHIPMAN: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: And the extent to which experts' opinions have really swung and had an impact.

ALAN SHIPMAN: The percentage of a week's NHS spending has become an alternative unit for how to measure Brexit impact. But what we tend to find there is that quite a number of different groups of economists have looked at various scenarios for Brexit, and they all produce these negative results. They all tend to be going in the direction of a small amount of damage or a larger amount of damage.

KAREN FOLEY: Because we don't have the slide right now, but basically it varies between about 7% and about 45%, depending on which of those groups you were talking about earlier.

ALAN SHIPMAN: The fact that all the predictions are negative is tending to be seized on by those who were always sceptical for Brexit, telling us, essentially, we need the soft option. We need to stay as close as possible to the EU because the further away we get, the more danger there appears to be.

But we know from people's psychology that if you're up against a certain loss, you tend to gamble against that loss. You tend to go for the wilder, the more risky option, which might give you a bigger loss, or it might actually pull you into profit. It might actually produce the better alternative.

And so there is a danger of that pushing for a soft Brexit as an alternative to being in the EU, but telling people flatly, you will be worse off than if you stayed in the EU, is actually going to propel people further towards the big unknown-- the hard Brexit, the extreme move away, which might plunge us into an even bigger problem. Or it might actually get us into the sunny uplands of the golden post-EU scenario where we're all better off. So pushing for the small move might actually cause people to gamble on the much bigger move-- the major step into the unknown. And I think we might see that unfold as that rapidly approaching, March 2019 deadline, approaches.

DAVID ROBINSON: That's a really interesting point, and it's making me think whether in fact that gambling bias was a major driver in the first place. Because if the experts are saying things could get worse, there's a small chance it could get better, but this will mean things stay the same. If things are already bad for you, there might be more of an impetus to gamble on the situation that could result in a better outcome for you than to stay with the status quo which is going badly.

KAREN FOLEY: And again, taking a very emotional stance on the whole thing indeed, as we've seen. Thank you so much Alan and David. If you're interested in these ideas, Alan's doing some updating of DD211 about the challenges of Brexit and David is writing a block for the new sociology course as well on these topics.

And you can also follow David's regular conspiracy theories news on Twitter. So all of those links are on the Resource page of the Student Hub Live website. We're going to take a quick break and watch a video, which is a power grab by Westminster. And then we're going to be back to discuss analysing the vote-- identity and geography-- with Allen and Casey. I'll see you in five.

[MUSIC PLAYING]