

Brexit: Good for the UK, good for the USA and good for the planet

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here at the Competitive Enterprise Institute and I am grateful to Myron for the invitation to outline the current trends and outlook in British environmental and technological policy. Most of all, I want to discuss the fantastic opportunity which Brexit presents – both to the UK and to our allies – for the return of sane, evidence-based, environmentally-tailored thinking. The EU’s environmental approach – and its attitude towards innovation more widely – has stifled progress at the expense of both the consumer and the planet. Brexit, in allowing the UK the chance to break free of this wrong-headed, statist, anti-science thinking, cannot come soon enough.

Happily, on 23rd June 2016, 17.4 million people in Britain voted to leave the European Union, more than have ever voted for any issue or political party in our history. The 72% turnout was the highest since 1992.

Article 50 was triggered on 29th March with the automatic legal effect that at midnight on 29th March 2019, the EU treaties in their entirety will cease to apply to the UK.

In June this year, we had a General Election in which 85% of the votes cast were for parties advocating leaving the Single Market, the Customs Union and the remit of the European Court of Justice. The main “Remain” Party – the Liberal Democrats – saw its number of votes fall.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will repeal the European Communities Act 1972, which gave effect to European law in the UK. It converts into UK law the entire corpus of European law. On the 11th September, it passed its vital second-reading stage in the House of Commons with a clear majority of 36.

Most recently, in her speech in Florence on 22nd September, the Prime Minister again confirmed that our objectives remain unchanged.

These, then, are the facts. Brexit is going to happen, and environmental policy stands to be one of the principle beneficiaries. The EU has single-mindedly pursued an overly-

prescriptive interpretation of the “Precautionary Principle”, smothering opportunities for innovation in thrall to the emotions of vocal activists rather than scientific evidence and advice.

The Green Blob dominates thinking in Brussels, with generous grants given to green groups so that they will lobby it for regulations which then require large budgets to enforce.

When I was Secretary of State, I participated in an Environment Council called by Lithuania as the incoming Presidency, to discuss European policy on fracking. So serious was the meeting that only elected Ministers were allowed in with all civil servants excluded. Yet to my surprise, we found a senior representative from the European Environment Bureau, representing 140 green organisations, speaking on equal terms with us. Towards the end of the meeting he gave us an emotive lecture about the dangers of shale gas exploitation. Some of my colleagues from Eastern Europe, for whom energy security is an existential question and who had just come out of decades of undemocratic rule, were absolutely infuriated.

After Brexit, we will be free of these Green Establishment camarillas and free to co-operate with our allies in driving innovation forward.

Global co-operation, local implementation

By its very nature, environmental policy must be global in scope, and it has been organised as such since long before the EU came into existence. In 1972 – the year before the UK joined the EEC – 152 experts from 58 countries attended the first United Nations meeting on the environment, in Stockholm. We were a founding nation of the 1979 Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Habitats, and early signatories to both the Washington Treaty, establishing the Convention on International Trades in Endangered Species, and the Ramsar Convention for protecting wetlands.

Leaving the EU means that the UK can retake a full seat on the world bodies that determine global regulation, at which we are currently represented as 1/28th of the collective EU vote. These include the WTO, the World Organisation for Animal Health, the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which regulates guidelines on food and food safety, and the International Plant Protection Council.

Retaking these seats will not only see us regain our right to vote in such bodies, but also our right to initiate new standards and propose amendments to existing ones. We will, once again, be free to co-operate with long-standing Allies across the Anglosphere and the Commonwealth. We are thus well placed to give global leadership to ensure a viable and sustainable environmental future.

Global co-operation on environmental matters is essential, but the fundamental flaw in the EU approach has been conflating co-operation with uniformity of implementation. Global rules must be interpreted at a national and even a local level so that they best meet the needs of the local environment. It is absurd to seek to apply the same rules across vastly different terrains and eco-systems. There are real lessons to be learnt from the significant powers which each of your 50 states deploy.

The weight of history supports this view. Democracies have a far better record of preserving the natural environment than do unelected governments of whatever shape. Examples abound of the failures of tyrannies and bureaucracies, from the drying up of the Aral Sea in central Asia as a result of Soviet irrigation policy — described by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon as “one of the planet’s worst environmental disasters” — to the catastrophic consequences of the European Union’s Common Fisheries Policy, which sees fishermen discarding a million tonnes of otherwise healthy fish every year.

Our departure means that, rather than being tied to a common and often wholly unsuitable European policy, we are free to introduce, amend and strengthen our own legislation conforming to international conventions. We can now do so in response to the needs of our own species and habitats.

We will, for example, remain committed signatories to the Berne Convention, but will be able to direct our efforts to the wildlife actually at risk in the UK, rather than to a notional pan-European list.

Perhaps the best example of the inadequacy of a uniform policy applied from Brussels comes from the Great Crested Newt. Each year, over 1,000 licences are issued to keep these newts out of development sites, costing businesses dearly and stopping desperately needed homes from being built. One developer was forced to spend over \$1 million in 2014 to catch 150 of the animals.

Such measures might be thought necessary were Great Crested Newts endangered in this country, but they can be found throughout England, and across much of Scotland and Wales. It is estimated that there are around 75,000 populations in the UK. They are, however, scarce on the continent, so because the UK has a disproportionately large percentage of European newts, many UK developers find themselves unable to build.

Worse still for the environment, the newt fences required can damage ground-nesting birds at nesting times, but a remotely-issued directive takes no account of this. Our new policy will be informed by the best local knowledge, focusing on the interests and priorities of the environment it serves, rather than on targets set hundreds of miles away.

The British Overseas Territory of South Georgia provides a fine example of the success of a local approach. The Islands have been able to take decisive action in arresting and

eradicating its most damaging invasive species. Rats, reindeer and various alien plant species have been eliminated, ushering in renewed growth in the numbers of fur seals, elephant seals, king penguins and a host of other indigenous species.

After Brexit, British environmental policy can see a return to this adaptive approach. The UK will remain happily bound to international conventions — we were, after all, instrumental in shaping many of them – but we will be free to interpret and control them locally.

Control of our borders

Similarly, we will use taking back control of our borders to better protect our native fauna and flora. Damage from invasive species costs an estimated \$2.4 billion each year. The red squirrel and the white-clawed crayfish face local and perhaps national extinction in Britain as a result of diseases spread by the signal crayfish and the alien grey squirrel, mistakenly introduced from America in the 19th century. The intransigence of the EU has meant that, while studies have been completed, effective action has been woefully slow, and the threat to these native species continues to grow.

An invasive flatworm from Brazil – the unfortunately-named Obama Flatworm, *Obama nungara* – is a predator of land snails and earthworms, and thus endangers both soil fertility and wildlife. It is already a threat to agriculture in France and is spreading rapidly across Europe. There are 18 further invasive flatworm species already in Europe, and the uncontrolled trade in pot plants is rapidly expanding their reach. Some have a yet worse reputation for environmental harm, with the New Guinea flatworm currently in France recognised among “the 100 worst invasive alien species in the world” by the conservation charity Buglife.

Such groups frequently report the arrival of exotic grasshoppers, wasps, beetles, moths and spiders at garden centres and nurseries, many with the potential to cause dramatic damage to native wildlife and agriculture, only to be met with inaction. Increases in global trading have increased the risks of plant disease, and the insistence of the EU on free movement has increased the rate of ash dieback, and put some 80 million ash trees in the UK at risk.

It is small wonder that the CEO of Buglife, Matt Shardlow, describes our current biosecurity as “feeble”. The British Isles being islands, however, gives the UK in co-operation with the Republic of Ireland an enormous natural advantage in protecting our landscape from invasive species. With the latest developments in technology and technique, we can capitalise on that advantage to develop a modern, responsive system to predict, monitor, and control the spread of pests and disease. We can implement a quarantine system with the kind of rigour found in Australia and New Zealand and ensure that the UK becomes a haven for animals, birds, plants and trees for generations to come.

Marine policy

As well as controlling our borders, we will regain full control of our waters and our Exclusive Economic Zone. The EU's Common Fisheries Policy has been a biological, environmental, economic and social disaster. It is a system that has forced fishermen to throw back more fish dead into the sea than they have landed. It has caused substantial degradation of the marine environment. It has destroyed much of the fishing industry. It has devastated fishing communities.

12 years ago, I wrote a Green Paper on the future of British fishing policy, travelling all over the North Atlantic and learning a great deal from the approaches of other nations, particularly in regard to their uptake of technology and selective gear, which I saw at Manomet in Massachusetts.

The most crucial aspect of our new, independent policy must be to take measures to prevent discarding. An EU discard ban has been attempted, but has proven unworkable as it simply banned the symptom, without addressing it as being the inevitable cause of the fixed quotas which the CFP demands.

The fixed-quota system is simply unsuitable for our mixed fisheries, and must be converted to one based upon effort control, which prioritises accurate and timely data collection. The system which most effectively achieves this is also known as "Days at Sea", allocating a fisherman a fixed time to fish in a particular area, requiring him to land everything he catches, with the latest technology carefully managing and tracking data in real time.

Such information is vital for the success of an effort control system, and technological advances make provision for the rapid temporary closure of fisheries in response to risks of excessive commercial catches. Imposing mandatory reporting of all landings further ensures that data collection is as accurate and up-to-date as possible. Thus, Days at Sea is a system which works in tune with nature, and is the only applicable system for the UK's rich mixed fisheries. Technical improvements have made the enforcement of such a system much more effective.

The Fisheries Minister in the Faroe Islands, where it is mandatory to land everything, summarised the pragmatism of the approach by saying: "We might not like what we find, but we know exactly what is going on." In contrast, the EU fisheries policy is based on information which is guaranteed to be inaccurate by at least 50%, and often six months out of date.

International relations with specific partners can be managed through the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) of which the Russian Federation, Norway, Iceland, Denmark (representing the Faroe Islands and Greenland) and the European Union are parties. The UK taking up a full seat on the NEAFC will be a huge gain for the environment.

The Precautionary Principle vs The Innovation Principle

That the European attitude to fishing technology lags behind the rest of the world is no surprise. It has also obstinately refused to embrace innovation in agriculture, and is fast being outstripped by economies around the world. It sits on some of the most fertile land on the planet and yet still imports food from the equivalent of 35 million hectares of someone else's farmland.

China, South Korea and North America are vying for global innovation leadership and the rate of change is ever accelerating. The intensity of development in these economies is twice what it is in Europe, which was once the innovation leader. The European devotion to the severest interpretation of the Precautionary Principle, which considers only the environmental hazards of innovation and not its benefits, is turning the continent into the Museum of World Farming.

This over-cautious, intransigent approach is typified by the EU's ban on the use of neonicotinoid insecticides, ostensibly to stem a decline in the honeybee population. This might seem a reasonable response, but for the fact that, quite simply, the honeybee population has not been in decline. In Europe and North America, honeybee numbers are higher today than they were two decades ago when neonics were first introduced. The same is true for wild bees. The observed declines before 1990 ceased or were reversed around the time when neonics were first introduced.

When the ban was first imposed, the EU cited the work of the French scientist Mickaël Henry. M. Henry now confesses that he may have overdosed the bees with neonics in his experiments, as many of us suspected at the time, and admits he has "no real clues" how much insecticide bees encounter in the field.

As a result, the European Commission now concedes that the neonics ban "was at no time based on a direct link on bee mortality." Which raises the questions: Why were neonics banned in the first place and why does the ban still stand?

Though green groups claim that neonics devastate bee populations, there remains much scientific debate over how much neonic residue gets into the pollen that bees consume. The fact remains that there has been no "bee-pocalypse." The reality is that the policy was more influenced by the hysteria of non-governmental organisations and their baseless predictions than a sober analysis of the science. As a result, an increase in insect pests has led to crop losses in fields across Britain and Europe. The canola area planted in Britain for this year was 557,000 hectares, representing a thirteen-year low and continuing a decline which has issued since the ban. In 2016, British farmers lost around \$25 million and almost 28,800 hectares of crops due to the ban.

The UK can now do away with the prescriptive EU approach, balancing its Precautionary Principle with the "Innovation Principle", which runs:

“The principle requires that whenever any policy or regulatory decisions are under consideration, the impact on innovation should be fully assessed and addressed.”

Thus, both the risks and benefits of any proposed new technology would have to be weighed against the risks and harms of existing technology. It would ensure that policy makers had to consider the potential of new innovations rather than simply strike them down, and force them to assess whether any regulation was likely to stifle progress. It would stimulate confidence, free producers to drive up their productivity and encourage investors in innovation to the UK for the long term.

It is an appalling indictment of the EU regime’s extreme technological risk aversion that the world’s largest chemical company, BASF, has abandoned all further biotechnology research for the European market. Their entire blight-resistant potato project has moved to the USA, which was terrible news for a constituent of mine who rang me to say that he had sprayed his potato crop 15 times that season, and that developing GM blight-resistant potatoes was the only solution.

GMOs: a case in point

Nowhere is their open hostility towards technology more apparent than in the European attitude towards genetically modified crops. Viewed from any kind of rational standpoint, the current developments in genetically-modified organism (GMO) technology are merely the natural development of the kind of husbandry that mankind has been practising for millennia. We have reached a position in which, as the author Henry Miller noted, “virtually everything in North American and European diets has been genetically improved in some way.”

Indeed, the precision of GMOs makes them inherently safe, with a single gene, or several specific genes able to be transferred from one plant into another with precision; unwanted characteristics are incredibly unlikely to make their way into a GM plant, but there are no such guarantees from random breeding. Every step in the creation of a GMO is closely monitored. Here, the Environmental Protection Agency, Food and Drug Administration, and Department of Agriculture require safety tests on every GMO crop before it comes anywhere near the dinner plate.

The results speak for themselves. Quite apart from the potential health benefits that GMOs can bring – eliminating allergens, guarding against contamination for mycotoxins and so on – the simple fact that from the three trillion meals served containing biotech crops in the last 17 years, the World Health Organisation confirms that nobody has ever made a credible claim of adverse reaction.

The potential for GMOs – safely and precisely – to alleviate food scarcity is vast. At present, various types of malnutrition affect almost 2 billion people around the world.

It accounts for the loss of 3 million young lives each year and stunts the growth of one in four children. If we cannot feed ourselves properly now, then how can we expect to do so with our present practices when the global population reaches 9.8 billion in 2050?

The answer is to keep up the pressure to continue the Green Revolution started by Norman Borlaug. I can remember as a child seeing traumatic news bulletins with images of starving people on the Indian subcontinent. Borlaug, put an end to this shame. He is now known as “The man who saved a billion lives” and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his pioneering work in transferring wheat with new genetics from the Americas to the Indian subcontinent in the 1960s. He used genetic modification to save a billion lives from starvation, and now India is a net food exporter.

When I visited South Africa in 2014, I saw at first hand the benefits that GM corn had brought the local smallholders. Production had soared from 1 tonne per hectare using conventional seeds to 5 tonnes per hectare with the GM seed. The crop which they harvest can withstand droughts and destructive pests, ensuring the farmers an income and spurring development still further. Once they had improved their irrigation, farmers expected see an increase to 10 tonnes per hectare.

Yet still, the hostility persists, and nowhere more virulently than in Greenpeace’s war on Golden Rice. It was developed at the end of the last century by Professors Ingo Potrykus and Peter Beyer, and is enriched with vitamin A-producing beta-carotene. In 2001, they donated their invention to the world in the hopes that it would be used to end the scourge of vitamin A deficiency, which is the principal cause of childhood blindness globally.

Had Golden Rice been a part of their diet, millions of young eyes and millions of young lives, primarily in Africa and South Asia, would have been saved. The Golden Rice Humanitarian Board lays the blame for their crop’s delayed development firmly with political suspicion and interference. Greenpeace, with its \$500 million war chest, has rallied the forces of green privilege in a global campaign to frighten the public about GMOs and to pressure governments into keeping Golden Rice off the market.

The Humanitarian Board believe that their project should have been where it is today, with the major part of a regulatory package finished, in around 2006, 11 years ago. There are now fewer deaths among children under five than there were 10 years ago, down to 16,000 per day from 26,000 per day. But they estimate that this death toll still equates to around 4,500 preventable vitamin A deficiency related child deaths daily, and many of them in countries where rice is the staple, usually grown close to where it is consumed.

It is small wonder that 126 Nobel Laureates denounced the Greenpeace campaign against Golden Rice in 2016, saying “Opposition based on emotion and dogma

contradicted by data must be stopped.” and asking “How many poor people in the world must die before we consider this a “crime against humanity”?”

It has been estimated that by embracing such technology, less land will be needed, by an area larger than India, to feed the 9.8 billion people of 2050 than is presently required to feed today’s 7 billion. Indoor vertical farming based on hydroponics may accelerate the rate of change yet further.

In sharp and frustrating contrast, Europe’s reluctance to adopt the latest innovations in agriculture diminishes potential yield and uses up more land than is needed.

US corn yields have overtaken those of France in the last 20 years. When I made this point in 2015, French yields were around 0.9 tonnes/hectare behind American yields. Now, France is missing out on over 3.5 tonnes per hectare compared to the US, amounting to a total loss of 5.6 million tonnes across its 1.5 million hectares. If France had kept pace with US technology, that crop could be worth an extra \$800 million to French agriculture, or else France could free up 500,000 hectares currently used for the corn crop and put it to use for wildlife, recreation, or forestry.

Conclusions

Leaving the European Union thus gives the United Kingdom a chance to rid ourselves of its stifling, backward-looking approach to technology. We shall return to the world stage committed to innovation, eager to co-operate with our friends – the United States chief among them – and receptive to the lessons which we can learn from across the world.

When I spoke at Cornell to a conference of agricultural scientists from the developing world in 2015, they saw the possible exit of the UK from the EU as allowing us to rejoin them in the forefront of advanced research, akin to Sleeping Beauty reawakening after 40 years.

New technologies must be embraced, and feasible new developments must be assessed rationally and soberly. For too long, the EU has sought to pre-empt and pick technological winners or, worse still, have set their faces against new technology on the grounds of little more than ill-informed sentiment and prejudice.

A rational, approach, based always on the best available scientific evidence, allowing the invisible hand of a liberalised market to grasp and elevate the technologies most likely to be beneficial in practice, is the surest means of delivering stable, sustainable and — most crucially — affordable policies well into the future.

A newly-independent UK looks forward to taking a leading role with the United States in developing and advancing those new technologies.