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Science and politics are inextricably linked. If we want the UK to participate in Horizon Europe, we need to accept that

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Many scientists breathed a sigh of relief when the UK finally signed a Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU on 24 December 2020. The prime minister, Boris Johnson, said it meant “certainty for our scientists, who will be able to continue to work together on great collective projects.”¹ Some people believed him. Now, it looks like their hopes will be dashed. Negotiations on granting the UK access to the EU’s research programme, Horizon Europe have stalled.

Exclusion will be damaging to UK science in several ways. First, while the British government has offered to fill the funding gap in the short term, there is no guarantee that this will continue. Science will have to compete against many other calls on public spending in a country projected to have, by 2023, the lowest projected growth in the G7.² But second, and most importantly, it will impede the close links that UK-based researchers have developed with their counterparts in the EU over 40 years.

It is unsurprising that British universities are alarmed. Universities UK has written to Maroš Šefčovič, vice-president of the European Commission, to express their concern.³ Yet it is unclear what they expect Šefčovič to do about it. To understand the problem we must go back to the Brexit negotiations and the choices that the UK made then.

The UK’s decision to leave the EU was virtually unprecedented. The only previous example was Greenland, in 1985, following a dispute about fishing rights. However, Greenland accepted the need to remain close to the EU, with its citizens also EU citizens. By opting for the hardest possible Brexit, and with a much larger and more complex economy, the UK was entering uncharted territory.

The situation was not helped by the high level of distrust the UK had engendered. Johnson was clear. The UK wanted to have its cake and eat it.⁴ That was never an option, but it gave the impression of a country that was not serious. And as then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker realised at an infamous Downing Street dinner with Theresa May, it was not clear that its ministers actually understood how the EU worked.⁵

The EU was especially concerned that the UK would use three issues as bargaining chips.⁶ These were the UK’s outstanding financial obligations, the rights of EU citizens living in the UK, and the situation on the island of Ireland. When the UK decided to leave the Single Market and Customs Union it was clear that there would have to be checks on the EU’s borders with it. There were two. One was in the English Channel. The other was between the UK and Ireland. However, a physical border, with checks, on the

island of Ireland would have threatened the hard-won peace process. Theresa May had found a solution. Her “backstop” would avoid most problems as long as Great Britain did not diverge from the rules of the Single Market. Boris Johnson rejected this, instead agreeing to a border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This was not ideal, but it was the inevitable consequence of Johnson’s policy. And it was an agreement that Johnson was only too happy to present as a success.

The EU had insisted, and the UK agreed, that these issues had to be settled before the UK actually left the EU. This would pave the way for a transition period during which the future trade relationship would be discussed. The Withdrawal Agreement, including the Northern Ireland Protocol, thus formed the foundations on which all else, including cooperation in science, would be built. To argue that they are, or ever can be, separate is disingenuous.

Now, the British government is talking about disapplying parts of the Northern Ireland Protocol. The EU, justifiably, sees this as a breach of trust and, as the British government has conceded, of international law.⁷ Attempts by the Attorney General to argue it is legal are widely derided.⁸ Its actions are entirely political. The Protocol is supported by the majority of people in Northern Ireland, where economic growth is exceeding that in the rest of the UK. Initial problems with medicines have been resolved. Most other issues could easily be, if the UK would agree to adopt Single Market regulations, but it won’t.

It is clear, therefore, that there is a way to achieve participation in Horizon Europe. The UK should adhere to an agreement that it made with the EU. Given that it won’t, it is unclear why anyone thinks that writing to Maroš Šefčovič will help. He is given his mandate by the European Council, comprising the heads of government of the EU. Many feel they have wasted enough time on Brexit. Appeals to science ministries and academies in other EU countries are unlikely to help. Everyone agrees that collaboration is a good idea, but not, it seems, a sufficiently good idea for UK ministers to stick to their word.

Yet many in the scientific community seem unwilling to address the fundamental issue. The argument that we must “Keep science out of Europe’s post-Brexit arguments” has obvious attractions but is somewhat naïve.⁹ Science and politics are inextricably linked.

Governments invest in science because they know it contributes to economic growth. If we are only interested in scientific progress, we should celebrate that research is being done where it is easiest and

most likely to succeed. And, looking ahead, whether that is the United Kingdom is a matter for politicians to decide. By opting for a hard Brexit, they have prioritised ideology over the interests of British science.

But that is not all they have done. The quality of British science owes much to those who have come from elsewhere. It is reported that only 12 of the 46 UK-based winners in the latest round of European Research Council grants are British citizens.¹⁰ Our present strength owes a debt to those who fled oppression in the past.¹¹ But those now coming from abroad must pay exorbitant visa fees and struggle with a Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Even those who come to work in the NHS must pay an additional surcharge to benefit from it. Many may question the prime minister's claim that "We're going to turn the UK into a kind of supercharged magnet, drawing scientists like iron filings from around the world."¹²

Just as the aviation and farming industries are doing, our leaders need to have the courage to speak out against the self-inflicted damage being done by the British government.¹³⁻¹⁵ It is it that has prioritised science over politics. Calling for both sides to compromise when one refuses to obey the rules simply misses the point.

Competing interests: MM has held EU research grants for many years and continues to do so. He is a former President of the European Public Health Association and a member of the EU's Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health.

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