

**Following the 2019 election, Boris Johnson urged “let the healing begin”. What do you suggest could be done to bring this about?**

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, the results of perhaps the most significant referendum in recent British history was declared: Britain had narrowly voted to exit the European Union (EU) with a slim majority of 52%. The nation, in quite literal terms, was firmly divided in half. A wound had formed and it required healing, but with Theresa May being unable to get her Brexit deals passed by Parliament and the deadline to leave the EU constantly being revised, this wound only worsened. It was not until Boris Johnson’s successful leadership bid to succeed Theresa May and his triumph in getting a working majority after an emphatic victory in the December 2019 general election, did Britain manage to finally achieve political stability. Thus, Johnson’s proud declaration to “let the healing begin” provided hope of Britain finally resolving the bitter issue of Brexit and to march forwards by healing the political, social and economic scars that had formed.

Indeed, the first step in the healing process was the passing of Johnson’s Brexit deal by parliament, which at last signalled Britain’s exit from the EU on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 (with an 11-month transition period). Yet, by no means are all the issues and concerns of Brexit held by various parts of the population resolved. Hence, in order to successfully suggest measures to ‘heal’ the nation, first the key socio-economic impacts of Brexit need to be understood and then appropriate actions to deal with such effects evaluated.

The ‘Remain’ campaign’s perhaps most significant argument was the potential damaging impacts of Brexit upon the UK economy and its jobs. This can be supported by the fact that 12.6% of the UK’s GDP comprised of exports to the EU, with the bloc being the destination of 44% of all UK exports.<sup>1</sup> Hence, an exit from the EU threatens the approximately 4.5 million jobs dependent on exports to its member nations, thereby causing concerns of increased unemployment and a recession.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, despite Johnson being able to pass his Brexit deal through Parliament, many key issues remain to be negotiated in the eleven-month transition period, most notably a trade deal between the two parties. Thus, an aura of uncertainty still remains within the nation and the impact of this has certainly been felt by the economy: business investment in the first quarter of 2018 was only 2.3% higher than at the time the referendum occurred, as compared to the Bank of England’s pre-referendum forecast of 13%.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, surveys of company executives demonstrated businesses withholding key investment decisions until the

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<sup>1</sup> European Movement International. *The consequences of a British Exit from the European Union*. Available at: [https://europeanmovement.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/EMI\\_16\\_PolicyPosition\\_Brexit\\_17\\_VIEW\\_FINAL.pdf](https://europeanmovement.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/EMI_16_PolicyPosition_Brexit_17_VIEW_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> WEBB, D and KEEP, M. (June 2016). *In brief: UK-EU economic relations*. House of Commons Library.

<sup>3</sup> TETLOW, G and STOJANOVIC, A. (October 2018). *Understanding the economic impact of Brexit*. Institute for Government. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/2018%20IfG%20%20Brexit%20impact%20%5Bfinal%20for%20web%5D.pdf>

UK's future relationship with the EU and other countries becomes clear.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to truly "heal" the nation, first the economy must be fortified and equipped to stand competitively within the world market and reduce its reliance upon the EU.

To remain competitive in the global market and reduce the forecasted negative impacts upon job prospects and their creation, an independent UK must establish itself an attractive place for foreign direct investment (FDI). With the UK having one of the highest rates of university graduation in the world and its spending (as a proportion of national income) on education being greater than any other developed country barring Norway and New Zealand, Britain must build upon its 'knowledge economy' to attract an inward flow of FDI.<sup>5</sup> For example, by increasing school funding and offering alternatives to university (e.g. more vocational courses and apprenticeships) the skills of young adults will improve. Consequently, the workforce will become more productive and skilled and thus, make the UK a more attractive prospect for investment whilst also being beneficial to the UK's economic stability after leaving the EU. Despite recent progress made with the introduction of 'T-levels' and an apprenticeship scheme designed to incentivise firms to hire apprentices, the government must ensure there are enough high-quality work placements on offer and an equality of opportunity regarding their accessibility if the desired effects are to be achieved. If this is combined with the UK successfully agreeing to new trade deals (preferably those with free-trade agreements) upon the already twenty signed, it will make Britain an even more alluring destination for investment whilst simultaneously softening the impact of reduced exports to the EU.

The UK's commitment to become an attractive destination for investment has already seen some success, with multinational corporations (MNCs) like Apple and Google establishing new headquarters in London whilst Qatar has pledged a £5 billion investment into British transportation, property and technology sectors.<sup>6</sup> However, therein lies an issue: such examples of investment within the UK are often concentrated within south-east England, more specifically London. Yes, MNCs investing within the capital is a positive indicator of large corporations still seeing London as a financial powerhouse, but this only deepens the divide the referendum demonstrated regarding how specific regions voted. England and Wales (countries that voted 'Leave') versus Scotland and Northern Ireland (countries which voted 'Remain'). The North (with regions like Sunderland voting 'Leave') versus the South (with cities like London voting 'Remain'). This conclusion can be supported by many political analysts advocating the belief of Brexit being a "protest vote" by communities who felt that they have been "left-behind" socially and economically by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Financial Times. (December 2019). *How Britain can prosper after it leaves the EU*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/05e5fcf0-176a-11ea-9ee4-11f260415385>

<sup>6</sup> The New York Times. (September 2017). *How 'Brexit' could change business in Britain*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/business/international/brexit-uk-what-happens-business.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=REGIWALL>

successive governments in Westminster.<sup>7</sup> Hence, Johnson and his government must reunite the population by first repaying the faith showed by regions that voted for Brexit, whilst also providing evidence to those that voted 'Remain' regarding Britain's ability to stand on its own two feet without the EU.

This can be conducted by diverting significant proportions of foreign and government investments in the construction of new transportation infrastructure that better connect the nations, cities and regions within the UK. It is crucial for this to occur because with more efficient transportation mediums businesses would be able to better provide customers irrespective of geography, which would then drive economic progress and employment within depressed regions. Additionally, it will increase labour mobility by enabling workers to commute to work from outside major cities and as a result, prevent skilled labour from migrating and concentrating within a few specific regions. Although there have been controversies surrounding some infrastructural projects like the HS2, it nonetheless acts as a positive indication of the government's attention to meaningfully address regional inequality and help deliver Johnson's promise of a "transport revolution" to "deliver prosperity in every part of the country".<sup>8</sup>

To compliment infrastructure development, Johnson must also seek to improve the vast variations in the quality and quantity of public services such as the NHS. The fact that a male in Manchester has a lower healthy life expectancy by 12.3 years than a male Buckinghamshire, speaks volumes regarding the pressing issue of regional inequality within the UK.<sup>9</sup> The first step undertaken should be increased investment in the NHS's logistical and IT systems to improve their efficiency. The Coronavirus pandemic, despite its tragic impacts upon the lives of thousands across the world and the UK, is likely to only encourage and quicken the process of improving the NHS across Britain as efforts are made to tackle this epidemic. Secondly, by attracting skilled and talented doctors, the productivity and the quality of the NHS will see significant improvement, whilst also addressing the shortages of doctors and nurses. At first this may seem a risky strategy due to concerns about the impact of immigration upon British jobs being one of the key reasons why Brexit occurred. However, by focusing on largely attracting skilled immigrants, it will not only support the above suggested measures but will also compensate for the likely loss of skilled labour from the EU and enable the UK to develop upon its 'knowledge economy'. By offering special 'NHS visas' and better marketing the government's current offering of Global Talent Visas', skilled medical practitioners (and talented

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<sup>7</sup> HARKER, J. (January 2019). *I'm a Remainer. So why do I feel more and more sympathy for leave voters?* The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/commentisfree/2019/jan/12/brexit-remainer-leave-voters-labour-northern-people>

<sup>8</sup> Financial Times. (February 2020). *Britain's green light for HS2 is worth the risks.* Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/b3c0a756-4cc3-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5>

<sup>9</sup> The Office for National Statistics. *Health state life expectancies, UK: 2015 to 2017.* Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/healthstatelifeexpectanciesuk/2015to2017>

workers in general) can be retained whilst also attracting such individuals from abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, to 'let the healing begin', the government must increase an independent UK's attractiveness for investment to minimise the short to medium term impacts on the economy and in the long-term, prepare it to become less reliant upon the EU. The unfortunate Covid-19 pandemic has decimated the global economy but could in fact aid the UK in negotiating favourable trade deals as it would be in the economic interests of both parties involved. Furthermore, the underlying socioeconomic factors behind the Brexit vote, such as regional inequalities, need to be addressed by significantly investing in communities outside the typical investment-hotspots like London. By revitalising local industries, attracting greater investment in growing sectors and maintaining the strengths of well-established ones like the financial sector, existing jobs can be largely protected whilst encouraging further job creation. This will act as an engine that will fuel future economic growth in an independent UK but crucially spread the benefits of such economic progress more evenly and help previously struggling communities to thrive.

**Final Word Count (excluding footnotes): 1463**

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<sup>10</sup> Gov.uk. *Global Talent Visa*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/global-talent>