

Making Brexit Work. A Book on Covid Provides Answers

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A book by a Remainer leads to the conclusion that, rather than focusing too much on scrapping regulations and free trade deals, we should work to grow the economy by being more nimble, agile, and creative. Brexit freedoms will have an important role to play in this, though we are unlikely to succeed without reforming how we are governed.

When Kate Bingham took on the task of leading the UK's Vaccine Task Force to secure the supply of vaccines under development at the beginning of the pandemic, she and her team made decisions they judged right for the UK. At the time, we were not exploiting new Brexit freedoms since we had not formally left the EU. But it's hard to believe that, had we not been about to head for the open sea, we would have been the one country out of 28 who decided to follow a faster route rather than taking a slow voyage round the Cape of Good Hope.

In her book *The Long Shot*, co-authored by Tim Hames (who rightly gets a smaller text font on the cover) Bingham tells the story of the stunning success of the 'race to vaccinate Britain'. I detect a certain embarrassment as she records how the UK left the EU flat-footed and trailing well behind, since she admits to voting Remain.

While I'm not suggesting she regrets her vote, Kate Bingham reminds us how Angela Merkle and President Macron cast doubts on the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine for those over 65. This 'legitimised vaccine opposition and hesitancy'.

EU hostility to the Anglo Swedish company went further. The EU sued AstraZeneca for alleged breach of contract over vaccine supply since the company had prioritised a UK contract. The book tells us a contract law specialist was reported to have judged the UK contract was written by people with experience of drug purchase contracts. The EU contract 'showed a lack of commercial common sense'.

Bingham points out that consequences of the controversy over the AstraZeneca vaccine meant that '1.4m doses were left unused in Germany when thousands of people were dying'.

The Vaccine Task Force worked with the Dutch company Halifax B.V. to scale up manufacture of the AZ vaccine. UK experts went to Holland to spend weeks training the Halifax team. Subsequently the EU blocked Halifax from shipping contracted doses of AstraZeneca vaccines to the UK, something Bingham calls 'an extraordinary irony given all this cross-border work.'

It's not difficult to spot the author's disillusionment with our EU neighbours. There was a proposal that France, Germany and the UK should merge their efforts to acquire vaccines.

Initially, Bingham had no objection 'in principle' to working with other European countries. She saw that a combined population of 200m would have more bargaining power with the vaccine companies than the UK on its

own. The kind of challenge that faces many UK companies after Brexit.

But the French proposal was short on vital details. And in an interesting echo of the Brexit slogan, we learn that UK officials did not want Britain to be 'bounced by France into an alliance that subsequently could not be kept under control'.

There were advantages in keeping UK control which our Remainer author recognised. 'We had no wish to lose our agility by becoming subject to a clunky decision-making process'.

The UK's VTF didn't get ahead of the EU because we'd scrapped their regulations or signed a free trade deal. They did it by being smarter, faster, working closely with pharmaceutical companies, and taking calculated risks.

We should aim to make a habit of this. The EU must balance the priorities, economies and politics of 27 nations. As we have seen with the war in Ukraine, this is not always easy.

The UK is a close union of four nations with mostly only Nicola Sturgeon to worry about. If we had still been an EU member when Putin invaded, would we have rushed to supply Ukraine with tank busting weapons, shaming the big beasts of the block to follow suit?

Would a cautious PM like Mrs May have wanted to consult our EU allies and seek consensus before risking an escalation? Would the German chancellor Olaf Schulz have hesitated for longer and President Macron dialled the Kremlin number one more time?

The spread of Covid was an unprecedented crisis and the need to develop and procure vaccines was urgent. Normal government procedures were suspended, and the UK Vaccine Task Force given powers to act independently. It could be argued that the way the VTF worked can hardly become an example of 'best practice'.

Bingham disagrees. The VTF's answer to competing with the EU on vaccine procurement was to make the UK 'an irresistible customer to the vaccine companies – offsetting our relatively small size'. She cannot resist adding a stinging comment: 'Being a good customer did not seem a priority for the EU'.

The road to being a good customer meant the VTF working with pharmaceutical companies collaboratively by helping them with manufacturing capacity and clinical trials. The pace the UK team worked surprised some, with one vaccine company saying it was not something they 'typically experienced when working with government'.

The most boring pages in *The Long Shot* are those where Bingham provides us with CVs of outstanding people who led the various sections of the VTF. 'Get on with the inside story', we cry. But Bingham wants to emphasize how much this was a team effort rather than an extended 'Didn't-I-do-well' job application. Time after time she praises a colleague, like a war time leader handing out medals. She quotes with approval Steve Job's reported remarks: 'Great things in business are never done by one person; they are done by a team of people'.

The VCT team achieved success that even surprised Kate Bingham. She writes: 'Within six weeks of my appointment, the VTF developed its strategy and built a team of industry and technical specialists alongside a team of Whitehall officials, expert in project management, contracting and diplomacy'. They prioritised vaccines under development. 'And against incredible odds, those vaccines turned out to be the right call'. The UK was the first country in the world to launch a Covid vaccination programme.

There are a number of passages pointing out the success of the VTF. These are partly Bingham's response to attacks on her as an unqualified beneficiary of Tory cronyism.

As the wife of a Conservative minister, she fitted neatly into a media narrative of cronyism, of contracts handed to people connected to the Tory Party. Too neatly. She hints she has not been in the habit of voting Conservative. Her anger was fuelled by the fact that many of these attacks appeared in that bastion of righteousness, the Guardian.

‘Yes, I happened to be married to a Conservative MP and minister’, she writes. ‘Since when is that a crime or a bad thing? And what did that have to do with my own political views? Are wives still viewed as chattels?’

In fact Bingham was an unpaid volunteer, leaving her job with no notice on a six months secondment. Her appointment did not lead to any investment in her company.

She must have enjoyed a report in *The Corriere della Sera* quoting a virologist comparing her experience with that of Sandra Gallina, responsible for procuring vaccines for the EU. He had tweeted: ‘Galina graduated from the interpreters’ school (and) had to deal with health for the first time in July 2020. Before (that) she dealt with agriculture and fisheries.’ On the other hand, as a venture capitalist Bingham had ‘over 29 years’ experience of investing in biotechnology and drug development companies.’

Bingham’s view of the vaccine saga as a best practice example of how government and private enterprise can work productively together has a lesson for Brexiteers. Not only does it show why the UK succeeded but also how the EU failed. It demonstrates we can compete with bigger economies by being more nimble, agile, and creative, and making Britain the most attractive customer; and, by extension, the best supplier. As well as, in certain circumstance, moving swiftly while the EU is still making up its collective mind.

Kate Bingham might not put a summary in quite these terms.

Her book, though, is wider than simply a narrative of the VTF’s success. *The Long Shot* doesn’t lack ambition. While telling one’s truth has become fashionable, Bingham’s truth may be more important than some recent outpourings. Her truth is not just the inside no-holds-barred story of her battles with the media but, most importantly, with Whitehall.

She seems shocked by the failure of Whitehall civil servants and politicians to understand fundamentals of contemporary science and how scientific commercial drug discovery worked. While during the pandemic ministers told us repeatedly they were ‘Following the science’, Bingham tells us most of them didn’t understand the science.

To draw on government funding the VTF was required to complete a Whitehall Business Case which had to include a strategic case, a commercial case, a financial case and a managerial case. Bingham says: ‘we had to argue almost every case out there except for the one that mattered: the scientific case.’

Bingham’s over 29 years in venture capital investing in drug discovery not only made her the ideal person for the job but also well qualified to spot how poorly Whitehall is equipped to meet the ambition of the UK to be a science superpower.

She is not a woman who holds back. She says if ever asked to name the biggest threat to the success of the VTF ‘the honest answer would have been ‘Large parts of Whitehall’. People were queueing up to conduct investigations into us.’

First in the queue was the National Audit Office (NAO). Bingham received an email from the NAO in July 2020 for

an investigation into how the VTF was performing 'apparently to demonstrate that public money was being spent wisely'. But the VTF had only started work in May.

The audit was postponed until August. The NAO sent a team who 'knew nothing about vaccines, manufacturing, clinical trials, or pandemic preparedness'. There were then numerous requests from them over five months which took valuable time to respond to. Some of these were 'ridiculous and inane'.

One has a twinge of sympathy for the NAO. Their bean counters had no beans to count. It was far from certain any beans could be grown. This was a new virus, and the aim was to create a vaccine at breakneck speed amid an international health crisis. 'The longest of long shots' Bingham calls it.

Of course the epidemic was a unprecedented event and one that threw together politicians and their officials, big pharma and academic scientists with an urgency and to a degree that had not occurred before. The very uniqueness of the VTF and the way it operated meant Bingham and her team had a front seat insight into the UK's the lack of scientific, industrial, commercial and manufacturing skills among civil servants and politicians.

What is more, she points out the civil service focuses on process rather than outcomes because of 'an almost obsessive desire to follow proper process'. While fear of media reactions helped foster a risk averse culture. Knowing 'little or nothing about actual commercial or scientific risk', it was safer for civil servants to drag their feet rather than make a controversial decision.

Whitehall was dominated by historians and economists, and few had worked in the private sector. Ministers were not appointed for their skills and expertise and were rotated on average about every eighteen months.

Even in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Bingham found few people who understood how her industry works. This was reinforced by 'an innate cultural hostility to business with deep suspicion about industry motives.' She might have added at this point that civil servants leap rapidly from department to department. It's almost as if the system is designed to prevent them or ministers from gaining expertise in any one sphere of government. Generalists are preferred.

And that's not all. Her broadside is followed by recommendations for reform. She wants Whitehall and government to focus on outcomes rather than process. She would mandate that those climbing the Whitehall ladder would need at least two years industrial, commercial or public sector experience.

Above all, the Bingham revolution would be to make scientific thinking and science play as important a role in policy making as economics. 'Scientific evidence should be central to policy and decision-making.'

The call for reform of the way we are governed is hardly new. The most recent push came in June 2021 when the Government published a policy document Declaration on Government Reform. While praising the civil service, there was a formidable wish list of things we needed to do better and another long list of promises on what the Government would do, though quite how was not spelled out.

The changes advocated lacked the robustness of Bingham's. For instance, while Bingham calls for at least two years industrial, commercial or public sector experience for civil service promotion to be mandatory, the declaration would merely 'encourage' it.

The document included an annex of thirty actions that should be taken with none being prioritised. One might risk being unkind in thinking that a shrewd Sir Humphrey had deliberately given the Government more than they could chew so that little ended up being done, or that doing what was easiest would make little real difference.

Bingham's analysis is important because it shows how weaknesses in our government people and processes play out in real life and because she puts an emphatic finger on the paucity of core skills in Whitehall and Parliament. She is, in my judgement, a slightly left of centre disillusioned liberal. Disillusioned with civil servants and MPs. Disillusioned with the EU over its vaccine failures and its hostility to AstraZeneca. Disillusioned with that bastion of righteousness, the Guardian, long read by her mother, a paper that repeatedly falsely accused her of being a Tory crony appointment to a post she was unqualified for.

But besides being a chronicle of disillusionment, the book contains positive lessons for Brexiteers. Rather than talking about the scraping of EU regulations and seeking free trade deals, important though these things are, we should rather focus on efforts to foster innovation and drive growth. Brexit freedoms to do things our way will inevitably be part of this.

We should stop asking how we make Brexit work. This plays into Remainer hands who, incorrectly, blame our present economic ills on Brexit rather than Covid lockdowns and the Ukraine war. Making Brexit work is a challenge that divides us once more.

Kate Bingham's important and honest book doesn't mention Brexit in the index, but she's pointed the way to economic growth outside the EU. We must be smart, nimble, innovative, and bold. We need the VTF's mindset of 'We can do this'.

The book is also a warning to Brexiteers. The biggest threat to making Brexit work may be dysfunctionality at the heart of our government.

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