

Steve's story

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I have worked for over 30 years as a healthcare scientist in universities and the NHS. The EU has been a crucial part of my professional life for all that time. Early on in my career I was involved in EU-funded research programmes that allowed access to a critical mass of specialist equipment and expertise that would not have been available if I had been limited to working in the UK. That formed the basis of my PhD and postdoctoral work, and was a formative experience. In more recent years, I have worked with research students from across Europe, who are often collaborating with industry based in other EU countries. The strength of the science base in the UK makes this a very attractive place to come and do research, and freedom of movement and the availability of EU funding allow us to attract the best talent in a way that is far easier and more welcoming than any proposed post- Brexit immigration system.

But my most significant engagement with the EU has been in quite a different area. In 2003 I became aware of a new piece of EU legislation, the Physical Agents (Electromagnetic Fields) Directive, that would have imposed restrictions on the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scanners for medical diagnosis and research. This legislation was being proposed on the basis of health and safety, but it quickly became clear that the evidence base behind it was extremely weak. This was the beginning of a 10-year journey for me and colleagues across Europe to get the law changed.

So is my story a Leaver's dream: a prime example of laws being imposed on the UK by the unelected European super-state? Not at all! For one thing, UK authorities were initially supportive of the legislation, and indeed wanted to impose additional restrictions in the UK. The first stage of our campaign involved direct lobbying of British ministers by professional bodies to change the UK's position, and a very critical parliamentary select committee report. The issue isn't whether the EU is capable of proposing ill-advised legislation: it certainly is, but our own government is perfectly capable of doing that too with no help from Brussels! It's about what democratic mechanisms exist to remedy the situation, and what opportunity there is for expert advice to be heard.

I can say on the basis of personal experience that suggestions that the EU is undemocratic and that the European Commission is a dictatorship of some sort are completely untrue. It is true that the Commission, which is appointed by member state governments rather than being directly elected, proposes legislation. But those proposals must be approved by the European Parliament, made up of directly elected representatives from across the EU, and the Council, made up of ministers from all member states. So unless elected MEPs and elected governments support a Commission proposal, it cannot become law. Some people claim that the European Parliament is not able to amend legislation proposed by the Commission, but can only accept or reject it. That is nonsense as well; I was involved in helping to draft

amendments for MEPs to debate as part of the democratic process. MEPs can be approached and lobbied just like national MPs, and there is a system of specialist committees just like select committees at Westminster. Having given evidence to parliamentary committees in both Westminster and Brussels, I found European parliamentarians to be just as open to expert opinion and advice as their British counterparts.

But surely if the UK leaves the EU, we will be able to ignore things like the EMF Directive altogether, and won't have to worry about any of this in future? That is a misconception as well: any plausible post-Brexit system of free trade between the UK and the EU will require a high degree of alignment between regulations. The so-called Great Repeal Bill has in fact incorporated EU regulations into UK domestic law to ensure this is the case. When new EU regulations are adopted in the future, it is likely that we will in effect have no choice but to adopt them as well in order to continue to trade freely with the EU, but we will have no ability to influence or ultimately to vote on them. In the case of the EMF Directive, had it not been amended there could have been implications for the design of MRI scanners sold in Europe, unnecessarily limiting their performance. Is it really plausible that manufacturers would have developed special models for the UK market alone?

All of my experiences of the EU have left me an unrelenting Remainer. The EU is imperfect for sure, just like any human institution, but the pros of membership far outweigh the cons. And when there are problems, we are far better off working with our European partners to resolve them to mutual benefit, rather than shouting impotently from the side lines.