

In praise of experts?

I did not agree with the distorted version of what Michael Gove said about experts. I find people with a genuine knowledge, enthusiasm and expertise about issues and problems are worth listening to and may be able to fix the trouble. A good doctor can diagnose and prescribe remedies. A good plumber can find the fault with your system and mend it. A good cook can produce a great meal. Studying, practising and keeping up to date in the relevant discipline is an important part of being able to do this.

The politician is the elected generalist who has to judge the expertise of the experts as a legislator and in some cases as a Minister making government decisions. When you are placed in such a position you soon discover that there are in most areas a range of experts you can turn to who may have substantial disagreements about what is good advice. Most government and legislative issues are different from needing to know you have broken your arm where you need a medical support for the bone to heal. They are wider and permit a range of views of how to resolve a problem. There may even be big disagreements about what the problem truly is. The politician has to cross examine the experts, think through the balance of probabilities, and apply commonsense and a judgement about what the public will accept when making the decision.

What Michael was getting at was an even bigger problem in today's world, where a large number of experts in a given field close ranks and all agree about an explanation or a preferred policy where the public is sceptical and where there is a reasonable chance they are wrong. This tyranny of the experts has bedevilled UK economic policy making all my adult life. As an example, for years the Bank of England, many in the Treasury and international organisations told the UK we must join the Exchange Rate Mechanism. I and a few others pointed out it was likely to cause boom and bust and to be deeply damaging. Our credentials and credibility were constantly questioned. The establishment had its way. It duly generated a very predictable boom and bust, with huge damage to the CBI businesses who had supported it and to many workers who lost their jobs. The same tyranny of the experts disagreed with rather more of us who said the credit boom of 2004-7 was unsupportable, only for us once again to be proved correct. The experts also ganged up to try to get us to join the Euro, which would have done grave damage to both the UK economy and the Euro had we done so. Fortunately the public was more sensible than the experts and made it impossible for government to join.

Ministers and MPs do have to stand up against the united voices of experts who have all collectively backed the wrong explanation or policy. That requires insight and courage by the elected officials, who will always be told they have no right to gainsay the experts, by of course those same experts. The media often makes this more difficult for the politicians. I had to spend much of my interview time during the referendum defending myself from the media complaint that I must be wrong and the so called experts right when the Treasury forecast a recession with 800,000 job losses for the

winter immediately after a Leave vote. This as I expected was a completely false forecast, but at the time the media went on asking who I was that I dared to contradict the Treasury and the IMF. I used to point out I had been on the right side of the forecasts over the ERM and the banking crash with the Treasury and the Bank on the wrong side, but the media didn't care. They suffer from expertitis. If all the main experts agree the media just argues their case. The media never gives experts the difficult and challenging interviews that they rightly give to politicians.

We now have the same again over leaving the EU. So many experts gang up to tell us the world has to stay exactly as the EU has designed it. They are once again making a huge misjudgement. Fortunately the public are more sensible than the experts in this matter, so they tell us just to get on with it.