

The long shadow of Project Fear

I am all in favour of experts. I read a lot of expert opinion. Daily I learn something new from reading someone's research findings about issues of public interest.

Reading plenty of experts has taught me several things. It has taught me that some so called experts are not up to the title, producing ill thought through material with insufficient proof. The BBC is specially good at mistaking establishment propagandists for experts. It has reminded me that in many difficult areas the experts disagree amongst themselves, which is often a welcome way of moving towards a greater understanding of the issue. I have also discovered in fields I study that there can often develop an expert consensus, held by many for fear of getting out of line. This can result in a catastrophic establishment failure because most of the tenured individuals dare not disagree. In economics the Exchange Rate Mechanism boom and bust and the banking crash great recession are two examples of groupthink gone wrong.

The worst feature of recent years has been when the establishment consensus allies itself with political forces and tries to dominate the democratic debate about a topic. The Treasury and Bank of England forecasts prior to the referendum we now know were wildly wrong and were clearly designed to help the Remain campaign. They forecast a fall in house prices, a fall in employment, a rise in interest rates and a fall in the pound if we left. Instead in the early months after we finally left the reverse of all those forecasts occurred. In the year immediately after the vote as well house prices rose, employment went up and interest rates went down. This poor forecasting undermines public confidence in official forecasts. It also angers the majority who disagreed with the establishment political view on the underlying question.

Today expert epidemiologists need to grasp that their forecasts will be carefully scrutinised and subjected to commonsense checks because of past forecasting errors by government advisers. Net zero advisers keen to speed the transition will need to ask why the public does not rush to transform their lives in the recommended ways. They will find they need to overcome scepticism about some of their claims.

Democracy places non experts in positions of power to take advice, to consider conflicting expert claims and to apply some commonsense to recommendations. It remains the best way of proceeding in a world where the future is always uncertain. For a democracy to thrive we need to debate the cosy and sometimes horribly wrong consensus views of a self selecting group of experts in any given area. No one peddling views gets a ride free from criticism in a thriving democracy.