

Transcript Interview Treib

Interview with Prof. Dr. Oliver Treib about

5 **The role of knowledgeability in political decision-making using the example of the Brexit**

Generally speaking, sensible political decisions can only be made if the decision-makers actually know what they decide on and what the consequences [of these decisions] are.

10 Regarding referendums this is especially difficult because people who do not have particular expertise need to make decisions. The ordinary citizens who do not have specialised knowledge need to make these decisions – that is the problem concerning referendums.

15 In general, media and political parties play an important role in conveying political information. In principle, this applies to parliamentary decisions, but it is particularly important regarding referendums because in this case laypeople are concerned. Thus, we need a public debate organised by parties, conveyed by media, that clarifies what this is actually about, what are the main points are and what are significant consequences? That sounds as if it was rather difficult to organise. However, there is a well-known example, namely Switzerland, the model country for direct democracy, demonstrating for a long time that this can work. In Switzerland, there are numerous referendums every year and most of them work well, because the parties and the media reduce the complexity [of the issue] and make it a reasonably sensible subject of decision.

20 In the 2016 Brexit referendum, this was a particular problem, because it is such a complex decision, or because it was such a complex decision. It is already difficult for ordinary EU citizens to assess the impact of the EU membership because they are only indirectly confronted by the EU. The EU regulations are mostly made part of national legislation and most people do not know: Is this EU legislation or national legislation now? This is a problem that complicates things. The other problem is that the general question – do we withdraw from the EU or do we stay – has very complex economic consequences which can hardly be assessed by ordinary citizens.

25 Prior to the Brexit referendum there were two main campaigns or two main groups campaigning: One in favour of remaining in the EU, and the other one advocating the withdrawal from the EU. The more important one is the Leave campaign, advocating the withdrawal. It actually focused on two topics. First, Britain's costs of the EU membership and second, immigration to Britain, especially from Eastern European citizens.

30 When taking a closer look at the surveys, data that was collected afterwards, interrogating voters, one realises that it were exactly these two topics that were most important to citizens. Thus, they took effect.

35 Concerning these two topics that were highlighted, there was a massive misinformation when it comes to the economic consequences or the costs of the EU membership. It was claimed that Britain would spend 350 million Pounds per week for the EU. The would be a rather large amount of money. However, it has been discovered that this number was exaggerated. Several different things were ignored, especially the fact that Great Britain receives back payments from different EU programmes. Thus, the real costs for Great Britain are considerably below the 350 million pounds. The inevitable conclusion is that this actually was a massive misinformation.

40 But I do not think that these incorrect information was the decisive factor in the results of the referendum. Because there are quite a number of other reasons based on actual developments that could have set some citizens – or rather a lot of citizens – against the EU. For example the issue of immigration. That, for example, is an issue you cannot

50 use as a fictional problem, so to speak. There was a huge number of people immigrating to Great Britain from the Middle / Eastern European countries – if the consequences of that immigration are positive or negative is argued about at least. There are certainly many advantages, but one cannot say that people worrying about their jobs actually do not need to be alarmed if there are 100.000, 200.000 people immigrating to Great Britain from other EU member states every year.

55 Some voices in favour of the withdrawal shed a dark light on the future consequences of the EU immigration. They influenced the public opinion by stating that Turkey would join the EU someday which would result in a huge migratory wave. This, however, was rather a scare campaign because the Turkey's actual chance to join the EU in the foreseeable future are very small.

60 Since the referendum there certainly is quite a number of survey data about the development of British citizens' opinion on the withdrawal from the EU. Looking at the data one realises that it is actually a rather stable public opinion. That is to say that both camps – people in favour of and opponents of the withdrawal – are rather strongly balanced. The referendums' result was rather narrow. What we can actually say today is: In case there
65 was another referendum, we would not know if we had the same result or if this time there was a small lead for the remain campaign. All in all it is rather stable, that is, the country is divided into two camps equal in size: supporters and opponents of the withdrawal.

For now, we can hardly estimate if there will be a second referendum on whether Great Britain should stay or leave the EU. There are actually supporters within the opposition
70 saying: We need to vote again. But it is not clear at the moment if this will actually happen. Personally, I would recommend a second referendum because of reasons regarding the theory of democracy. And this is also about the citizens' level of information. Today, people would know a lot more about what the actual consequences of a withdrawing from or remaining in the EU would be. This is why it would be a reasonable thing to organise a
75 referendum again – at least to vote on the modalities of the withdrawal. That is, do you want a hard renunciation of the EU or do you want to keep bonds with the EU, even if Great Britain leaves the EU formally.

Generally speaking, one can say that citizens have relatively small knowledge about the EU. That is on a rather low level. But we know from election research that the level of
80 information matters; if people catch up on the EU – for example in the context of European election campaigns or such referendum campaigns. This influences the voter's choice massively.

Citizens who give more attention to the EU and who deal with the question of what choices they can actually make, decide according to their EU-related opinion. That is to say, they
85 base their choice on the fact that they are in favour of or against the integration. People who are not as informed, whose degree of knowledge about the EU is rather low, tend to decide according to national criteria in the elections. In case they do not approve of the current government, they use the referendum or elections to teach the government a lesson, for instance.

90 In other words: Better knowledge about the EU plays an important role in dealing with the question: According to which criteria do people make their choices in those referendums? People having more information decide rather objectively, they decide on the contents at issue, they actually opt for or against the EU and not for any other things that are of importance in the national context.

95 The decision-making processes on European level are rather complicated. There are many different stakeholders coming into play and most citizens do not know about the particular roles of the stakeholders, they do not know what the European Commission does, which role the national governments play in the Council. Thus, the whole decision-making process is so extremely complicated, that many people are not able to fully understand them.