

The European perspective on Brexit: yesterday's ...

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Three days with postgraduate students and others in Copenhagen was interesting last week.

The underlying assumption of the EU Horizon 2020 Coffers project which provides most of my employment at present is that since the 1990s there has been a gradual increase in the intensity of change on tax and that the pace of that change has moved from very cool, slow and almost imperceptible, to a hot, rapid and even turbulent process of transformation at present. Coffers strands for Combating Financial Fraud and Empowering Regulators and our aim is both to trace and track that process of change, but to also have traction by suggesting the creation of new tools for increasing tax authority effectiveness. This course gave me the first chance to discuss an idea I have been working on to an audience. It will appear here in due course.

Right now what I want to mention was how little Brexit was mentioned. UK politics might be obsessed with this issue, and rightly so. From our national perspective the change makes Suez look like a modest incident, so massive will be the consequence over time for our national self-identity, let alone our economic prospects. But Europeans have other things to think about. Twenty-seven states will continue without us. And they are at best curious about the terms on which we will leave.

When I suggested that Brexit could be a trigger point for further tax change the idea was, I think, considered faintly ridiculous. The view seemed to be that we in the UK might be heading into insignificance, but that is a sideshow for them. And if the UK breaks up (the consensus on a united Ireland was high), 'so what?' was the reaction. There was little interest in whether Scotland left the UK: that was a domestic matter for us to deal with now.

Everything is a matter of perspective. The European perspective on Brexit would appear to be that it's yesterday's news.