

Academic Society: Get Interested

On Saturday, 17th, Mr Roberts (Head of Geography) spoke to the Academic Scholars on National Sovereignty, an issue that has gained much publicity since the Brexit vote in June. His lecture was informative, balanced and highly enjoyable, raising many thought-provoking questions about Britain's economic and political future in a post-Brexit world.

Mr Roberts posed that the Brexit vote was entirely fuelled by the electorate's belief in 'regaining our sovereignty', both in the straightforward sense of clawing back powers from Brussels, but also premised on the idea that immigration was seen to be affecting Britain's autonomy. The primary focus of the lecture was the question of whether by leaving the EU would Britain get any or all of its sovereignty back. Mr Roberts started by outlining the shift in the EU from something that was originally meant as a vehicle for free trade, to the current much larger organisation that encompasses the economic and political union. In essence, one of the key issues is: if we leave the EU, are we taking away enough of that higher power from the 'very, very dangerous people in Brussels ...happy to destroy democracy' (sic. Nigel Farage), that Britain can actually regain its sovereignty in any event?

Mr Roberts argued that, in some respects, Britain would be more of a sovereign state out of the EU: it would have control over labour movement into the UK and political decisions could be exclusively made in Britain and not Brussels. Yet, it quickly became clear that Mr Roberts thought the issue a far more complex matter than this. He went on to contend that preventing the free flow of ideas to and from Europe in an increasingly globalised world

would prove increasingly difficult to achieve. As a result, some of the less acceptable (and distasteful) ideas, such as fundamentalism, which can destroy sovereignty would continue to pervade British society and politics with or without Brexit.

In addition, pressure groups are still able to powerfully lobby governments and affect key decisions making, thus undermining (or augmenting, depending on your viewpoint) national sovereignty. Thirdly, the problem of controlling capital in Britain is extremely relevant to the sovereignty debate, in particular foreign investment in Britain. This capital can, it was argued, mean that Britain is still unable to control its own decision-making: 50% of the office blocks in London are foreign owned and 10% of houses in central London are purchased through offshore companies to list just a few examples of the extent of foreign stake holds in Britain.

This foreign investment and its potential to undermine sovereignty is particularly relevant in the light of the recent Hinkley Point decision, with an £18 billion investment, nearly all of it from French and Chinese money. Added to this is British dependence on transnational corporations (TNC's), such as EDF and Starbucks, which create new development opportunities but which can also erode sovereignty.

The questions at the end of the talk then raised the idea of whether any country in the world is completely sovereign. The answer seems to be: certainly not. No nation, regardless of how far flung and censored they are, is ever completely immune to outside influences; sovereignty is something a country should aspire to, but is also something

we must realise will never be completely possible.

Mr Roberts ended his talk by advertising his Geography Book Club and its book of the moment, 'Prisoners of Geography' by Tim Marshall, which deals with the subject of sovereignty, as well as geopolitics in general. Anyone interested in joining the club should drop him an email.

Finally, when asked if anyone in the audience would have voted for Brexit, only one person raised their hand. The truth is that, for me at least, Brexit was an incredibly complex subject and I was that lone hand...

The Academic Scholar's Programme runs every Saturday morning from 8:30 in the Arts Centre Theatre. Please note that submissions for the second edition of the Scholars Journal are due by September 30. Just remember: Get Interested! Cras es Noster.

Nick Brown, U6 Academic Scholar