PREDICTIONS BY 'EXPERTS'

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During the election campaign the Brexiteer politician Michael Gove was frequently reported by the media to have opined that the British people had had enough of experts. This quote is still regularly attributed to him by way of illustrating that politicians don't like experts, since all too often the policies favoured by the former conflict with the advice and warnings of latter. This sentiment is one to which probably most skeptics would subscribe. Yet we should also be alert to the prejudicial manner in which soundbite quotes like this one are frequently flung around. Examples of this go back a long way and it would be too much of a digression to list some examples. Suffice it to say that what Mr Gove actually said on June 6th was 'The people of this country have had enough of experts from organizations with acronyms, saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong'. However, his interviewer interrupted him mid-steam, hence the abridged quote.

I for one think Mr Gove made a good point. How could any layperson come to a reasoned conclusion about the merits of remaining in the EU or otherwise with so much conflicting advice and opinion from 'experts'? Admittedly, it was doubtful whether many of these 'experts' were really experts at all, merely writers who had gained undeserved influence in the media in matters of which they had no more understanding than the intelligent layperson.

Where experts and pseudo-experts are likely to be pilloried is when they make public their predictions on matters of national interest and turn out to be wrong. In the last two years some of them – political commentators - have met their Waterloo in a big way – viz the last two general elections, the US presidential election and the EU referendum. Based on the polls, I myself wrongly guessed that Theresa May would have a comfortable working majority, but I didn't claim to have any relevant expertise that allowed me to go beyond casually mentioning this to my wife and a couple of friends, let alone announcing it to the nation for a handsome fee.

As it happens, there has been great interest in what appears to have been extraordinary prescience on the part of someone not hitherto considered as a political or economic forecaster. Step up to platform novelist Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989). I have in front of me one of her lesser-known novels *Rule Britannia*, published in 1972. This was at the time that the UK was negotiating to join the European 'Common Market' and did so officially on the first day of 1973. In 1975 the electorate voted by referendum to remain a member but in *Rule Britannia*, against the advice of the Prime Minister, the majority reject membership, with dire consequences for the economy. Salvation is sought by a union with the United States. The new nation is called USUK, as in 'you suck' (if you haven't already done so, recall to mind Theresa May holding hands with Donald Trump not long after his inauguration, and the astonishingly forgiving and sycophantic attitude of the Brexit-supporting press towards this man following his election). In the novel the union turns out to be a disaster.

We shall have to see whether events follow the downward spiral depicted in Dame Daphne's novel. For the time being, be economical with your predictions, particularly when they involve human behaviour, and if you insist on announcing them, hedge them with some reference to probability – 'On the whole, I think it more likely than not that …', 'It's not certain, but….', and so on. At least that's my advice.