DEBIASING POLITICAL DECISION MAKING THROUGH "VALUE-FREE" SCENARIO MODELS

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Abstract

The paper builds on arguments developed in client-facing work stemming from Britain's decision to leave the European Union. It argues that scenario building in political contexts – whether for expressly political clients or those in the private or third sectors – needs to pay particular attention to the scenario construction phase to eliminate inbuilt and frequently unconscious bias. Whilst decision bias is generally understood, the paper argues that insufficient attention is paid to the backfire effect; proposes a model which seeks to reduce that effect and outlines further approaches. The paper (a) describes work in progress, which we describe as "value-free" to encompass the explicit debiasing work done at the outset, (b) is a brief sketch of the issues encountered in the work, and (c) is presented for preliminary discussion and feedback.

Keywords: Scenario Planning, decision bias, backfire effect, populism, Brexit

Introduction

Brexit

Britain's departure from the European Union stems from a referendum vote on 23 June 2016. The debate leading up to the referendum was complex and increasingly polarised. By the nature of the binary question asked ("Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?") the argument inevitably fell into a discussion of only two options.

The "leave" vote won, with 51.89% of the turnout.

This is possibly the most significant challenge to the United Kingdom's political and corporate structures since the Second World War. The decision involves the untangling of some forty years of increasing regulatory, corporate and political alignment in favour of standalone systems. Importantly, it also impacts on the nation's sense of self – what it is to be British as a citizen of a country, of Europe, and of the world.

Membership of the European Union has been a fixed fact since 1973. Prior to the UK's accession, various British governments had spent many years attempting to join what was then the European Economic Community, progressively aligning with the bloc through the creation of EFTA and then through alignment with EEC regulations prior to accession. For at least 45 years, therefore, government, business, and the education system, has been working on the basis of integration with Europe and European institutions.

Post-referendum analysis indicates that the leave vote was substantially older, and located in poorer parts of the UK, than the remain vote. Younger people, perhaps more used to perceiving themselves as "European", voted overwhelmingly to remain.

Brexit has an additional complication in that its outcome is entirely unknown. The current UK government position is of a "deep and special partnership", and that "Brexit means Brexit", but as with so many other matters where issues of politics meet issues of emotion, the implications are unclear, to the level where no-one's Brexit looks like anyone else's.

Populism

Brexit can be seen as an example of the rise of populism, a catch-all phrase which includes a distrust of government, beliefs being favoured over the opinions of experts, and an increasing nationalism. This movement has found its expression in events such as:

- Polish shift right

- Swiss shift right

- Brits shift right

- Brexit

- (Trump)

- Austria nearly shifts right

- Macron

- Italy reject Renzi ref

- Merkel weakened/AfD rises

- Austria really shifts right

- Czech go populist

- Catalonia

- EU quotas fail

- Putin wins

- Orban wins

- Italy crisis[1]

Populism: issues

This is not the place to discuss the reasons for the rise in populism. However, it raises a number of issues for policymakers, and hence for business. Three are key:

- Youth vs age. Whilst the people behind populist movements are of all ages, those who vote for them are predominantly older. However, those who have to tackle the effects include both cohorts, and it can be exceptionally difficult for those who are on the losing side of a binary choice to engage effectively with the implications of that decision. We

have found that younger professionals, used to a life within Europe, for instance, are having real trouble engaging with the implications of life outside it.

- Distrust of experts. The reaction against expertise, whether it be in science and medicine[2], or in the distrust of advisors[3], complicates decision making by introducing what is essentially an unanswerable opposition ("I don't believe you") to fact. There is no easy resolution of this issue.

- Emotional investment. The oppositionalist, binary nature of many of the issues results in people gaining entrenched positions where it is emotionally easier to pick a side and defend it than it is to see that the other side has valid opinions or, even more difficult, may in fact be right.

The combination of these two last points has been compounded in what is generally known as the "backfire effect".

The Backfire effect

The backfire effect is the modern articulation of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance[4], brought up to date by Nyhan and Reifler[5] and expanded upon in numerous papers, articles[6] and social media discussions.

Essentially, the backfire effect holds that **"**A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point."[7]

Issues for decision making

The essential problem our clients found was that their thinking was clouded not only by the normal issues which affect one's thinking about the future – lack of precise information, compromised or conflicting reasons for doing the work, unconscious or conscious desire for a particular outcome and so on – but by the fact that they were too embedded in a view about the decision that formed the start point of the scenarios in the first place. This emotional investment in one side or other prevented them from thinking clearly about the future.

Methodological approach

Our initial approach was to develop a scenario set for "Britain in 2030: Four post-Brexit Scenarios"[8]. We published this set and its implications in a paper of the same name in 2017[9], and subsequently published a series of short papers derived from each scenario[10]. We presented this set in a number of locations to a variety of audiences over the course of late 2017 and early 2018[11].

This paper accompanies the presentation to the EU Science Hub's 6th International Conference on Future-Oriented Technology Analysis (FTA) – Future in the Making Brussels, 4-5 June 2018. The presentation includes a slide deck, the relevant slides for which are abstracted and described below.
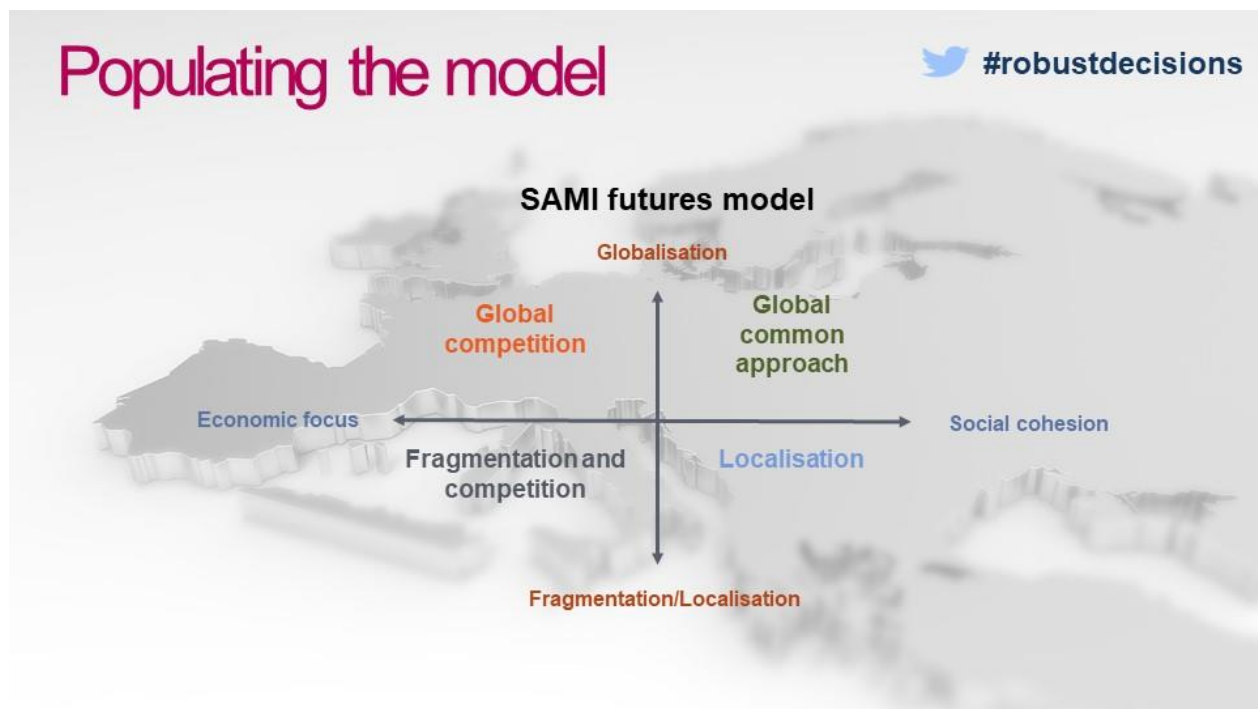
Our initial approach was to develop a simple 4 quadrant scenario set on two axes – social, ranging from economically focused to socially cohesive; and governance model, ranging from globalisation to fragmentation.

Exhibit one: axes.
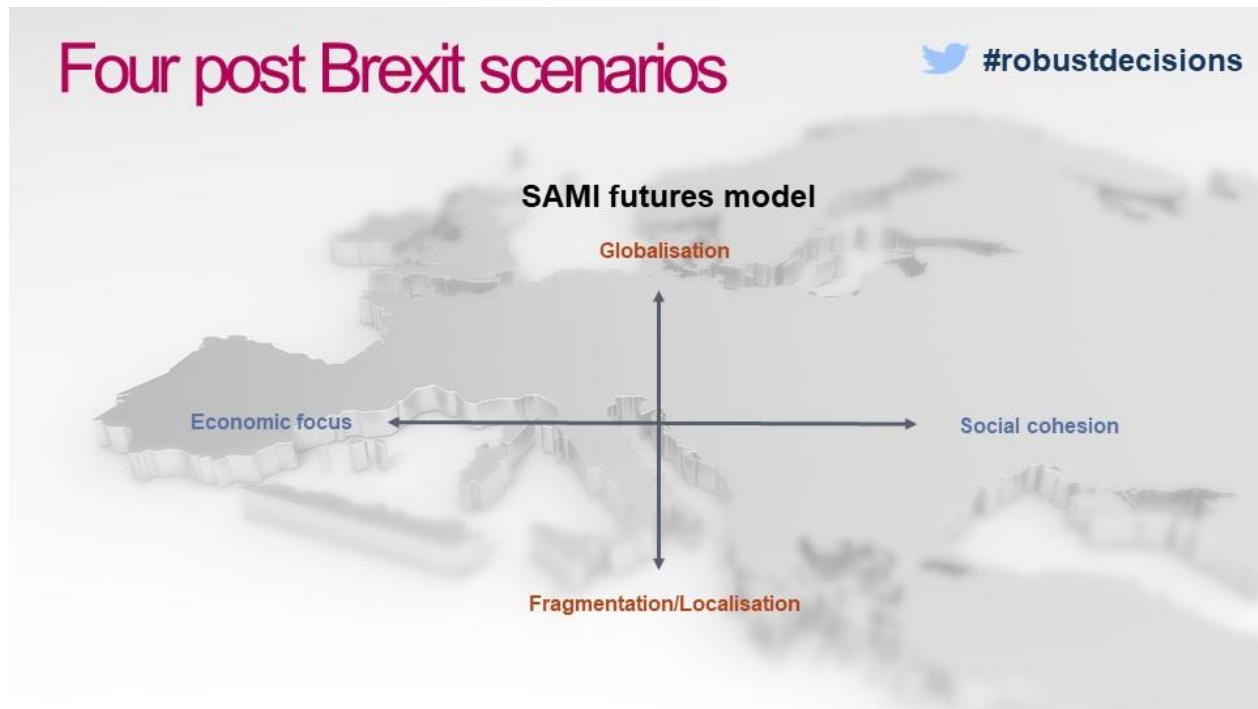
The quadrants were assigned their own nomenclature as exhibit two.

Exhibit two: populated axes

The implications for each quadrant were developed separately as below.
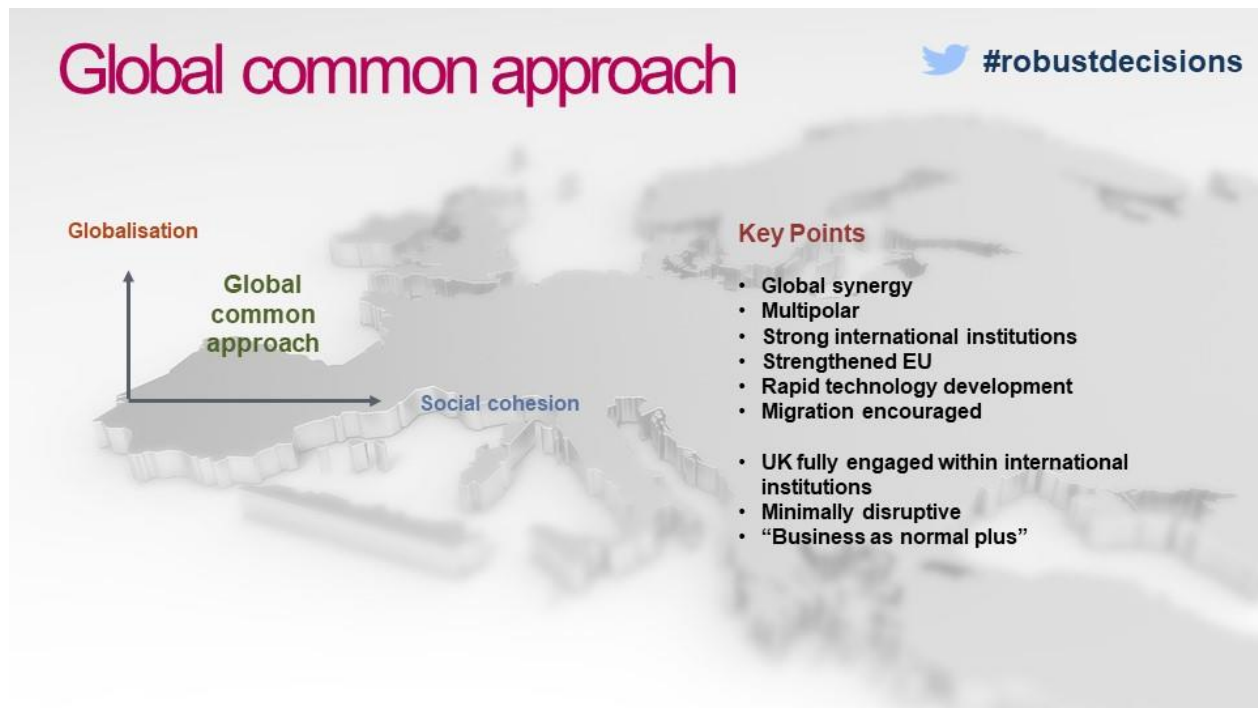
Exhibit three: global common approach

Exhibit four: global competition
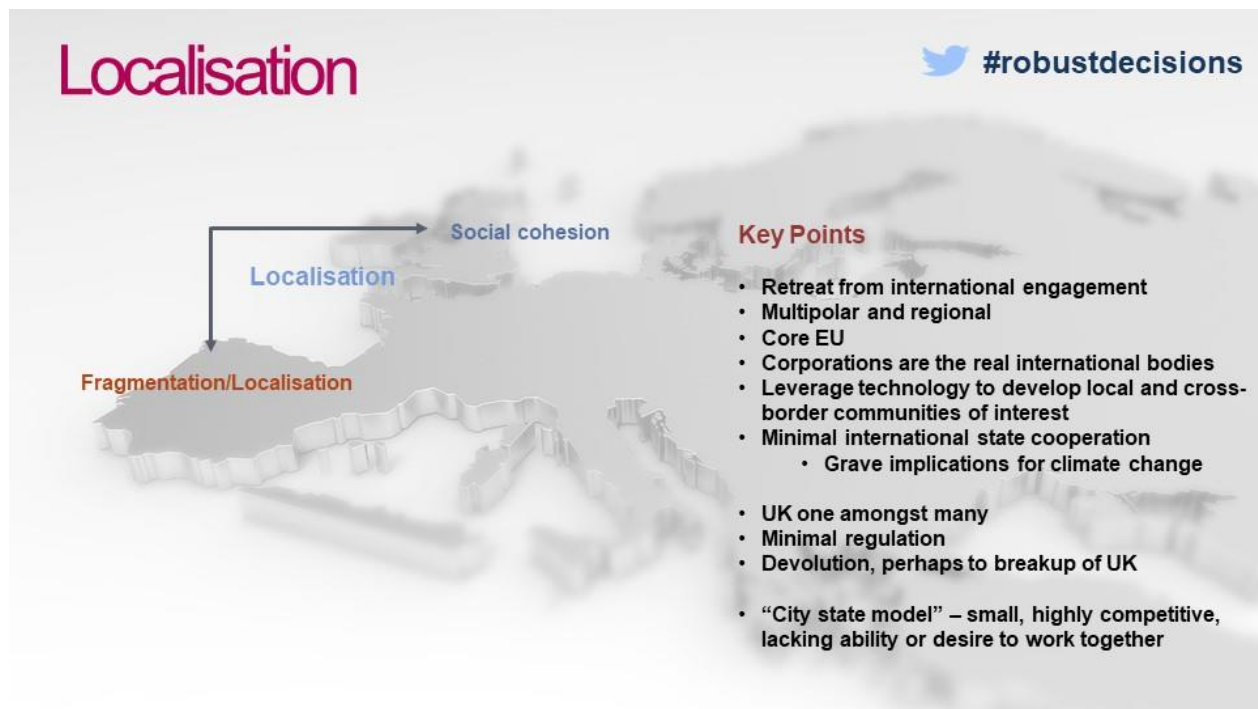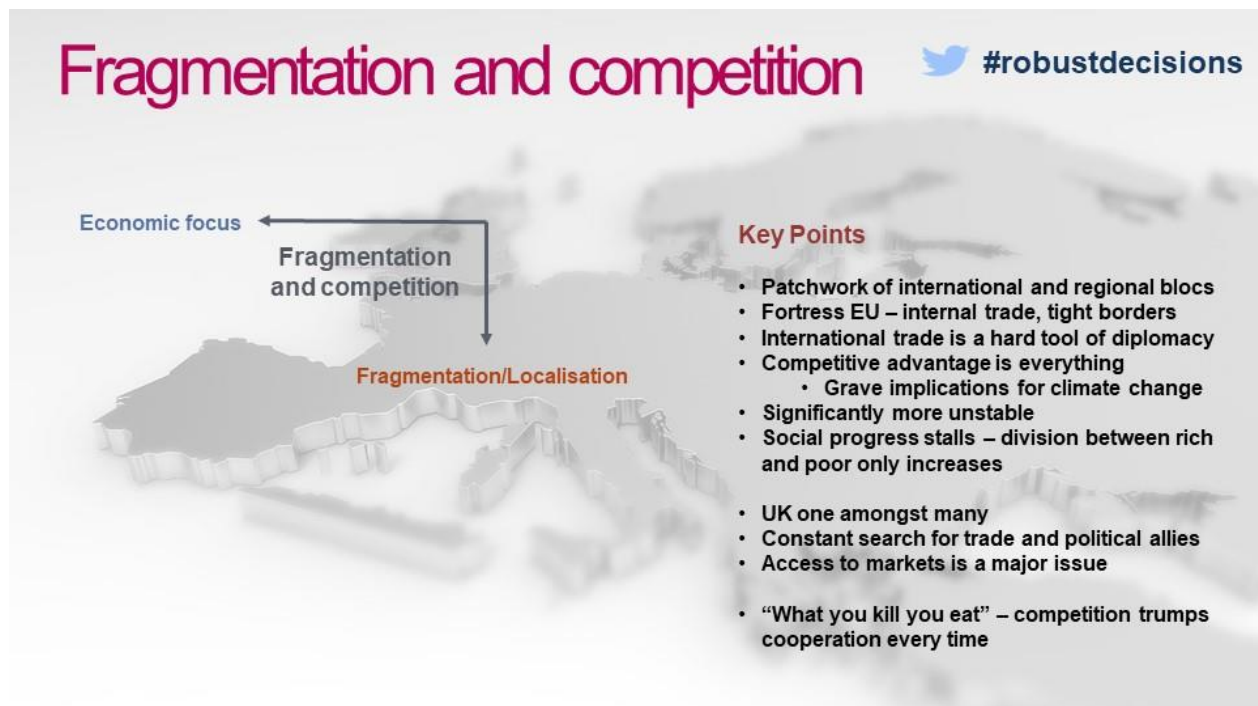
Exhibit five: localisation

Exhibit six: fragmentation and competition

Results, discussion and implications

Feedback from clients has been overwhelmingly positive. They appreciated

- "the space to think about this without worrying about Brexit"

- "the clear air it gives us to think about the future"

- "the fact that I can think about the opportunities not just how bad it's going to be"[12]

This implies that the ability to communicate is by itself improved by the removal of potential biases, by providing a "safe space" for clients to think about complex and divisive issues without actually having to explicitly engage with the issue itself

We have found that it helps to acknowledge the implicit bias of the participants at the outset. A form of words such as "Don't think you're not biased about this, because you are: you cannot avoid being" directly confronts the issue at the outset. We have been told of a sense of relief that this underlying bias is "out in the open" at the start of the process.

However, acknowledging the biases only works if the scenario set itself is very consciously unbiased from the beginning. This implies:

- A clear acknowledgement of the existence of potential bias in the team that creates the scenario set is vital.

- The scenario construction team has to have sufficient respect for each other, and sufficiently strong internal dynamics, to survive the process.

- External checks (in our case, of Fellow or Director level oversight) are important in seeing whether bias has unwittingly crept in.

- It helps to have at least one person on the team with an academic or professional interest in decision bias more generally.

- "Live testing" in front of teams of entirely disassociated people from varied background is very useful in refining the model.

We have also found it useful to make explicit the difference between forecast and scenario. Scenarios set up a virtual space within which concepts and their implications can be discussed; forecasts imply budgets and budgets imply promises, which automatically closes down options, and makes the thinking process considerably more fraught.

We continue to analyse responses to Britain in 2030, and are continuing to develop the scenario set. Alongside colleagues in SAMI with particular interest in decision bias, we continue to work on the bias/debiasing implications and opportunities.

The backfire effect is only one of many potential biases that can influence both scenario set creation and use. However, it is also one of the most evident. Whilst scenarios are generally understood as providing a space within which one can think about the future and its implications, the underlying assumptions and methodologies are poorly recognised in the client base, and there is a question about how far one can engage clients with the engineering as opposed to the result.

Further work needs to be done on our side on broadening the implications by integrating a fuller range of debiasing tools; and in further testing of the concept against live client interaction.

Conclusions

Conscious debiasing at the outset of the scenario construction process is a multi-step process, and is dependent not only on the quality of the scenario set but upon the determination of the development team.

We believe that this model provides a potential route to thinking about the implications of contentious political topics in a way that provides clarity for clients, whether they be in politics directly or in the impact of those politics through their involvement in business or the third sector. Communication, comprehension, and results all seem to be improved through this model.

References

[1] This list taken from *twitter.com/GoodwinMJ/status/1001864564156153857*

[2] "evidence-based medicine" against the anti-vaxxer movement, for instance

[3] The overwhelming majority of experts in the UK recommended against leaving the European Union

[4] Festinger, Leon, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, 1957 and subsequent publications

[5] When Corrections Fail: The persistence of political misperceptions, *Political Behaviour* forthcoming.

[6] E.g. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/denial-science-chris-mooney/

[7] Festinger op cit.

[8] After, "Britain in 2030"

[9] Available by request from the author

[10] https://samiconsulting.wordpress.com/tag/brexit/, October and November 2017.

[11] Including to the Institute of Risk Management, London; various government and international bodies in Europe; and in published form to members of the UK Parliament.

[12] Verbatim quotes from participants at the Institute for Risk Management Risk Leaders' Conference 2017