

Final Say: Top British scientists back The Independent's call for a referendum on Brexit deal

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Many scientists are concerned about the impact on international networks and funding a chaotic Brexit will bring ()

Leading British scientists, including two Nobel prize winners, have backed *The Independent's* call for a referendum on the final Brexit deal, as the number of people signing the [Final Say](#) petition surged past 500,000.

With the prospect of a no-deal Brexit looming, the scientists have joined a variety of politicians [and organisations](#) in supporting the case for a public decision on the final deal.

Sir Paul Nurse, the Nobel prize winning geneticist; Sir Fraser Stoddart, a Nobel winning chemist; astronomer royal Lord Martin Rees; and renowned microbiologist Dame Anne Glover are among those backing the campaign.

"I am very concerned about what happens to research – not just science but research in its broadest sense – if we leave with a chaotic [Brexit](#), with a no-deal scenario," said Dame Anne, the president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.



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Sir Paul Nurse, director of the Francis Crick Institute, agreed that a second vote on the terms of the deal is now necessary.

“It’s essential – we know there was misinformation and that people didn’t understand the complexity,” he said.

“We send the [European] Commission X and we get back from the Commission X plus Y ... it is the only part of the EU budget where we as a country make a profit.

“The estimates are that it’s in excess of £500m a year and it may be as much as £1bn.”

I think it’s wonderful that The Independent has put its head above the parapet and come out with this petition

Sir Fraser Stoddart, Nobel Prize-winning chemist

The backing of leading scientists follows that of the British Medical Association, which represents more than 160,000 doctors, and the National Union of Students,

which represents 4.3 million students across the country, which have both signed up to the Final Say campaign.

While science has taken a back seat in the public debate around Brexit, which has focused on topics like the economy and immigration, it is one of the areas that stands to lose most.

Polling [conducted by](#) the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) in 2015 suggested more than 90 per cent of scientists agreed that EU membership is a major benefit to UK science and engineering.

[The Independent's campaign](#), launched last Wednesday, is intended to appeal to both sides of the debate and hopes to win for the British people the right to make the final decision on the Brexit deal.

Dame Anne said that when the first referendum took place people had no idea what Britain would look like outside the EU.

[Brexit Casualties](#)

“I think that was very unfair for voters,” she said. “There was so much misinformation that in order to safeguard the democratic process people should be able to have a vote on what is now apparent about leaving the EU.”

Astronomer royal and former Royal Society president Lord Martin Rees said if there is a substantial shift in public opinion “there is indeed a case for a second referendum”.

Chemist Sir Fraser Stoddart added his voice in support of the campaign, which he hopes will bring some sense to the “lunacy” that currently pervades both major political parties.

“I think it’s wonderful that *The Independent* has put its head above the parapet and come out with this petition,” he said.

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Theresa May has vowed to retain the UK’s status as a world leader in research, but many are not convinced.

“There are lots of parts of our future economy that we were told would do just as well as now or even better – but it has become clear since then that not all of those

guarantees to keep things going stand,” said Dr Mike Galsworthy, medical researcher and co-founder of Scientists for EU.

“Whether that is guaranteeing our full participation in the EU science programme or [nuclear agency] Euratom or all the investment structures like the European investment bank.”

One of the biggest issues is money, as a considerable chunk of the UK’s research funding comes from programmes like the EU’s flagship Horizon 2020 project.

“What’s most important is to be able to have at least 15 different nationalities in a large research group – that’s the way we do science, we do it at a global level,” Sir Fraser said.

“Science is a family. They can shove 10 times the amount of money at the very narrow cultural situation in Britain that will evolve and they will still not succeed – because many people, the very best people, will leave.”

The government’s chief scientific adviser Dr Patrick Vallance has [previously stated that](#) “if you want to be a successful country scientifically you have to be international, you cannot be parochial”.

Researchers have warned that by introducing barriers to top talent and participation in international study groups, British science will suffer. Polling by trade union Prospect showed nearly 70 per cent of EU scientists in the UK are thinking of leaving after Brexit.

“That is clearly a significant percentage, but what is particularly on our minds is that percentage has gone up consistently since the referendum – which shows that all the government statements and ambitions so far have not resolved the uncertainty our members are feeling,” said Prospect’s deputy general secretary Sue Ferns.

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This is in part why the union, which represents more than 140,000 scientists, engineers and other specialists, has decided to back a second referendum.

“I expect that the woman or the man in the street thinks ‘who the hell cares, it’s just research, it doesn’t really bother me’,” said Dame Anne.

“But it should bother every one of us.”

If there is a no-deal Brexit, the UK’s ability to collaborate with with European colleagues will be “severely diminished if not completely cut off, at least for a short period of time”, she added.

“We are very good at research and we quite rightly have a good international reputation, but if you look at where our high impact work is it is work done in collaboration with our partners in the EU.”

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Sir Paul said: “Science is exceedingly important to society as a whole.

“Driving the economy, improving quality of life, protecting health, protecting the environment – all of these are public needs.

“We are introducing barriers to attracting high-quality people because the present visa system for outside the EU is utterly unsuited for purpose.

“We are seen by the rest of the scientific world as turning in on ourselves.

“The whole Brexit business has alienated the intellectual young in the country and I think that has been completely underestimated.”