

# Demolition – life beyond Brexit?

**Richard Vann**, RVA Group managing director, asks what's next for our industry after March 29.

**T**his article is a work-in-progress if ever there was one. As United Kingdom politicians are unable to say with any certainty what will happen to the country in the coming months, predicting how the world of demolition will fare post-Brexit is almost impossible. If I had the answer to the UK's future, I would be grabbing prime minister Theresa May's ticket to Brussels and going to finalise the negotiations myself.

At the time of writing, discussions remain ongoing, with no real clarity as to what the exit deal looks like. Any forecasting can only be theoretical.

However, one thing is for sure, irrespective of the outcome.

Demolition contractors and consultants that can do business, and do it well – safely, cost-effectively and with respect for the environment – will have a long future ahead of them. This is especially the case for demolition engineers who specialise in particularly large-scale and complex assignments.

But how can I say any of this with certainty, given the muddy economic climate that the UK currently finds itself in?

We need to cut through the scaremongering and the crystal ball gazing and focus on the facts. We are preparing for what could represent an admittedly significant period of change as a country – or maybe not. But this is not the first time that the demolition industry – or UK commerce as a whole – has been subject to external forces.

## THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Change happens all the time in business, not least in our world. We constantly face new and evolving threats and opportunities, and as I said earlier, the more robust of organisations anticipate them, accept them, adapt to them and deal with them. It is just another stage in the industry's evolution – albeit this time it has been politically initiated.

The basic economic principles of

supply and demand are still very much at play. So, whilst Brexit could bring about new challenges, ranging from legislative developments to licensing amendments, we can address these barriers.

At D&RI's World Demolition Summit in London in 2017, I spoke to delegates, as the keynote speaker, about the level of opportunity that exists beyond the UK. I said at the time that only a small proportion of demolition firms had been bold enough to tread into wider European territory – and beyond – in pursuit of the vast amount of work that exists there. UK contractors have the potential to execute the overseas projects that are crying out for our much-needed skill-set. Yet sadly, while the numbers may have changed slightly, the trend is probably very similar 18 months on, and a huge amount of international work remains untapped.

Some companies are happy to stick with domestic work, which is fine, and/or others think it simply is not worth the hassle, which of course is their decision. But the reason I make this point is because, if the bulk of a demolition firm's work is in the UK, the level of worry surrounding Brexit is even more unfounded. The industry, generally, has never looked to aggressively expand into Europe.

## KNOCK-ON EFFECT

So yes, import tariffs may change, which could affect the cost of demolition plant and equipment, and consequently have a knock-on effect for how contractors price for jobs, if margins are to be protected. And we need to be resolute, as an industry, that this doesn't just lead to the battering down of project fees, if there is a risk that corners will be cut. It may also complicate the importing of explosives from European Union (EU) manufacturers, which means project scheduling will need to be adjusted accordingly – who knows? It remains to be seen.

But as managing director of a business that has for many years operated internationally

– and that has also established offices in the EU – I do think overseas work is worth any perceived "hassle". Of course, there have been times when we have assessed enquiries and thought, at first glance, that cultural differences, language barriers, or a lack of resource available locally could create insurmountable issues. However, unless the country in question was experiencing political unrest at the time, for example, there have actually been very few instances when an assignment has not been workable.

None of this commentary is intended to dumb down what has been a tough and often frustrating time for business owners and their teams – across the board, not just in the world of demolition.

Many people wish Brexit would disappear, whilst others are keen for a definitive outcome once and for all, so both camps are currently in limbo. But whatever the outcome, I feel confident that a new "norm" will quickly be found, and – for those with the attitude and ability to work in the EU – the perceived barriers will quickly be demolished. ■



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RICHARD VANN