

# The Telegraph

## Sir James Dyson exclusive: 'I would trigger Brexit now – and negotiate trade deals over time'



Sir James outside the new 'D9' building which holds the company's most secret research work CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

By [Alan Tovey](#), industry editor

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Sir James Dyson leans back in his chair, places his hands behind his head and looks out through the glass wall of his office, out across the huge open-plan interior of his company's Wiltshire headquarters.

He's considering the referendum result, [having campaigned for Britain to leave the European Union](#).

"I thought it would be very close," he says, his voice languid. "But I had absolutely no idea. In a way, I thought I was supporting the losing side, but I thought our arguments were better – and ultimately I was proved right."

It's the first time he has spoken [since the Brexit vote](#) and, although not gloating over his side's victory, he is confident about the UK's future.

"Absolutely I'm delighted to be out and don't think we have to negotiate anything," he says, when asked what happens next on the road to Brexit. "I know exactly what I would do if I was running the country. I would leave and then, over a period of time, I would negotiate things."



Sir James is best known for his company's vacuum cleaners CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

He's all for a quick exit and blow the consequences, having previously said that, despite the free movement of labour, EU nations aren't supplying the highly skilled engineers his company needs. Instead, the company has to negotiate laborious red tape to source the brainpower it needs from the rest of world.

And commercially, Sir James – who is best known for his range of vacuum cleaners – doesn't expect Brexit to deliver much of an impact.

"They are going to want to have a free trade deal with us more than the other way round," he says of European soon-to-be-ex-partners.

"The imbalance of trade is £100bn so, even if we have to pay an import duty, it's not much and it's far less than currency swings."

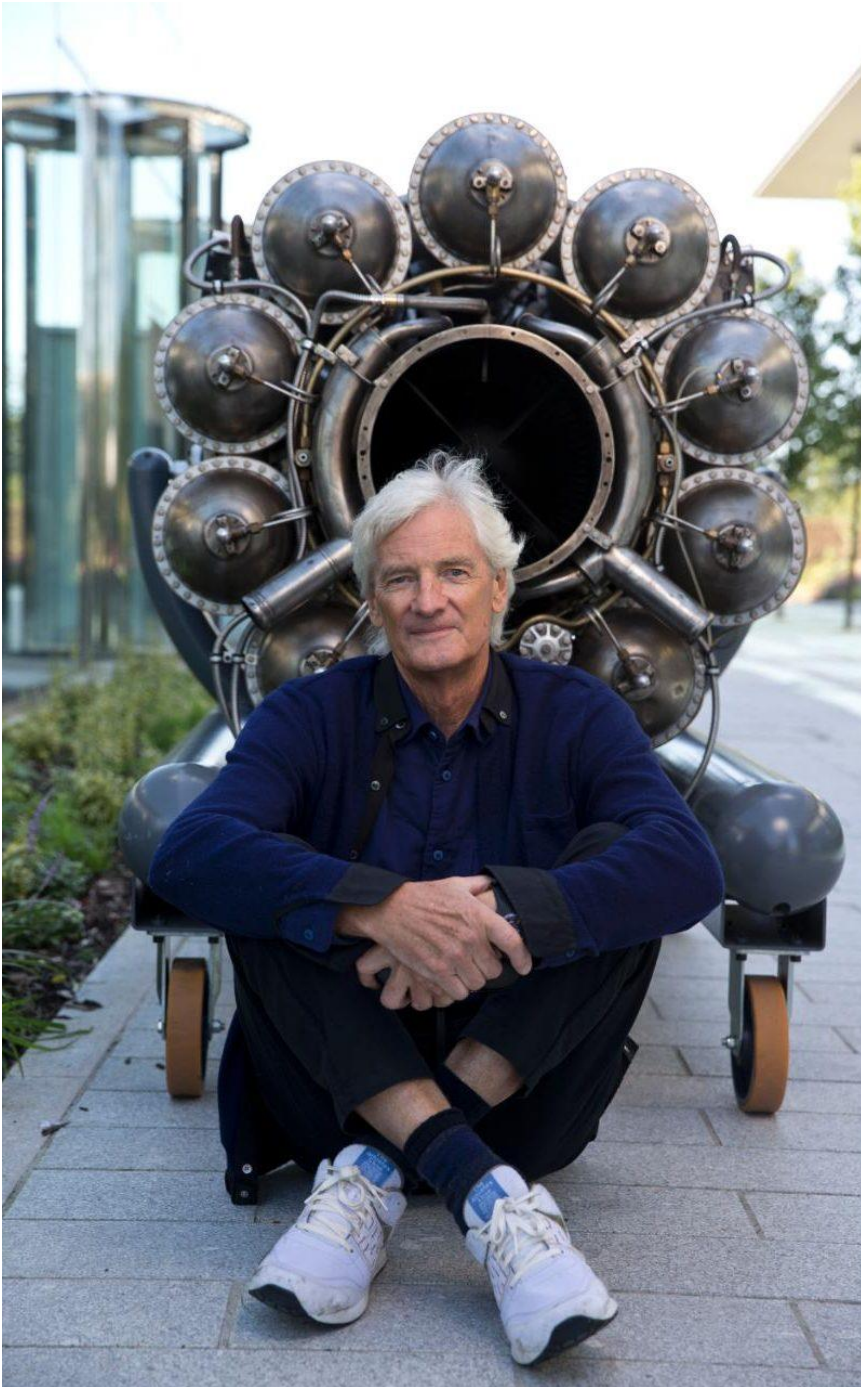
He pours scorn on the idea that the EU is single market anyway. "It is not. There are different languages, boxes, plugs, marketing and so on, different psychology, different laws. There's a lot of cost involved."

He also reveals that, in the confused days following the referendum, he was approached by David Cameron's office to take a role in helping shape Britain's exit from the EU, which he turned down.

"I sort of think I've done my bit," says Sir James. "I was on a Prime Minister's advisory group for five years. I've got a business to run and a lot of other things to do. I'm a practising engineer, not just a company owner. I am with my engineers all the time. My time is enormously taken up doing that."

But he's no Little Englander. Sir James employs 7,000 staff, about half of them in the UK, mainly at the company's technology centre in Malmesbury, Wiltshire. The bulk of the remainder are in the Far East where Dyson does its manufacturing, but also some R&D work.

The latest phase of the Malmesbury centre officially opens on Wednesday and Sir James is keen to talk about that, but there's one more thing to discover about his support for Brexit. Why would the owner of a £3bn global business want to weaken, rather than strengthen, international links?



Rocket man: Sir James Dyson with the working jet engine he keeps at his company's Wiltshire base. He fires it up occasionally CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

“Sovereignty is the most important reason,” he says. “And I would say that, wouldn’t I? I started my own business. I wanted to be independent as a business. I don’t want to be part of a conglomerate.

“I see huge strength in independence, making your own decisions and choosing the people who run your own enterprise. Being subservient to Europe, having to do what Europe says, is entirely not in this country’s interest.”



He's certainly his own man. Having started the business in 1993, working from an old coach house where the customer services department was a phone in the corner, Dyson's current base embodies the beautiful design, innovation and engineering the entrepreneur demands from all the company's products.

Building "D9" is the latest addition to the company's campus and completes construction work – for the time being. Like the rest of the site, it was designed by architect Chris Wilkinson, and inside this cube's reflective glass hides the company's latest "RDD" projects.

"We say research, design and development," clarifies one of the company's flacks, emphasising the importance placed on the design of the company's products.

It takes a special pass to get inside and there is no way *The Telegraph* will be allowed in to see any of the 30 projects currently being worked on in total secrecy by 450 engineers. Each project will be signed off by Sir James, who is involved at every stage.

Watching from the glass-walled canteen next door, staff – almost every one of them looking as if they are fresh out of university – come and go through D9's revolving doors. Each one clutches a low-tech hardback notebook with bright yellow label on the front marked "Dyson – confidential" in bold, black letters.

"The average age here is 26," says Sir James. "We like to employ people young – before they get sullied by other businesses."

Those in the canteen eat food prepared by a chef recruited from London restaurant L'Escargot and don't even seem to register the English Electric Lightning jet fighter hanging from the ceiling. This 1960s era jet is intended to foster creativity by having design icons dotted around the site.



A Lightning jet fighter hangs in the canteen at Dyson's base CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Others include one of jet inventor Sir Frank Whittle's engines – “We started it up yesterday, but we could only have it on idle power,” says Sir James – and a Harrier jump jet sits in the car park.

Why bother with them and such beautiful – and no doubt expensive – buildings?

“I absolutely believe that if you arrive at work and walk into a building where every detail is beautiful and striking, then walk past a Harrier, a jet engine and a Lightning, all these things are inspirational, exciting and uplifting and that's what we want to do,” answers Sir James.



Another design icon is a Mini, cut in half to show its workings CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Outside, he points to the nature trail running around the site. He believes it allows people to bump into each other randomly, again fostering ideas. The whole aim is to create a university type campus that fosters the exchange of ideas.

But it's not just Britain's “Googleplex”. “I hope it's nicer and done by a better architect,” says Sir James. “I have been to Silicon Valley. Here we've got greenery and hills.”

Posing for photographs, he hugs his arms to his chest, apparently fighting off the cold despite the September sun. Until this point, there has been no indication that the Reebok trainers and jeans-wearing Sir James is 69.

He's still enthusing about his design icons. Pulling up to the company's base, there are notices on nearby roads warning Dyson staff not park there, and the company car park is overflowing. Are these additions practical when they take up large chunks of the car park?

“Perhaps not, but it's worth it,” says Sir James. “A Concorde engine is arriving soon and we're trying to get a Vulcan,” he adds, referring to the RAF's giant Cold War bomber. “That'll be difficult. No one's ever moved one before...”





Sir James hopes to - somehow - have a Vulcan bomber at the Dyson base CREDIT:EPA/MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

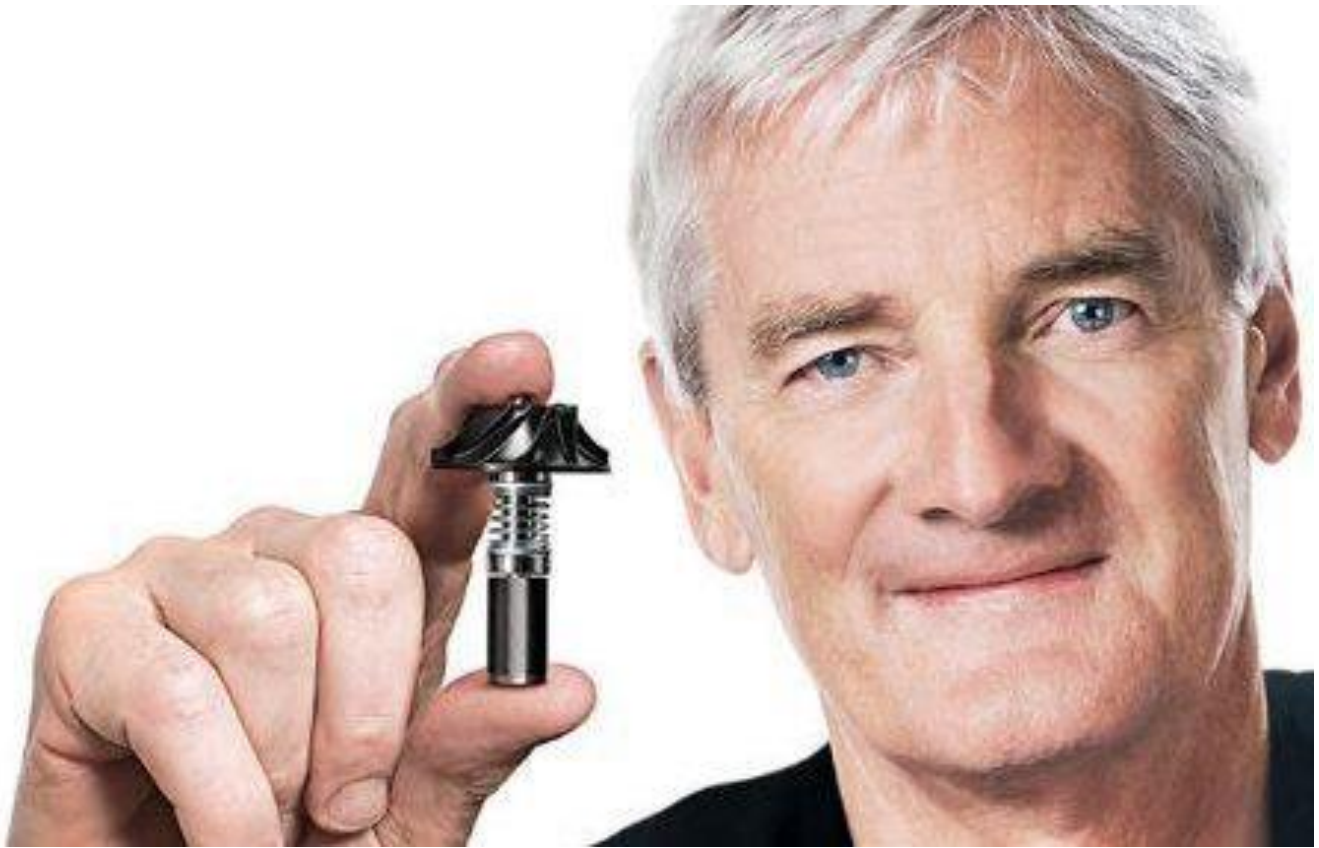
While these features – along with a Citroen DS9 in an engineering lab and a Mini that has been cut in half outside the front door – might seem slightly eccentric additions, Sir James is convinced they help add to the corporate ethos.

“Everything you do has to be well designed but not everyone is a designer,” he says. He believes that an understanding of design doesn’t have to be taught, it can be “picked up by osmosis”. Very few of Dyson’s engineers are designers, having trained as engineers first, then gone into design.

But Sir James admits he is the company’s “oddball”, having done design and then picked up engineering, learning from a mentor in his first job before striking out on his own.

Being his own man is very much shown in the way the company works. Sir James says he – and therefore the business – is “seriously into” robotics, but Dyson only recently released its first robotic floor cleaner. “I could have done it earlier, but I wanted to get it right,” he adds.

Then there’s Dyson’s electric motors. The company is acknowledged as a world leader in the field, though Sir James says it took 17 years to get there.



Sir James took 17 years to perfect the company's motors

He admits that motors “might seem boring” but he “enjoys taking the prosaic, mundane everyday things people aren’t interested in and making them interesting”. The motor he used in his latest product, the Supersonic hairdryer, was featured in *Vogue*, something he considers a victory for engineering.

As well as making electric motors interesting, he’s also made them in demand. Four years ago, he tried to sue a rival business, claiming it had employed a mole in Dyson’s labs to learn the company’s secrets.

But despite this obvious technological advantage, Sir James says he won’t sell his motor designs to others – even though it might bring in more money than the current range of products.

Asked why not, he snaps back an answer. “It might be an amazing revenue stream but I would rather my engineers were concentrating on the next one and the one after that than worrying about selling our existing one,” he says, adding that this was the kind of pressure a public company would yield to.



Dyson spends £5m a week on R&D - or 'RDD' as the company likes to call it

“I’m not interested because I don’t want to be a commodity supplier. I want to make products that utilise technology, not just sell bits.”

Then there’s the difficult question over Dyson’s decision to offshore production. It was forced on the company Sir James says, when the local council wouldn’t give planning permission to expand the factory. As a result, UK production stopped and went to the Far East.

“It’s not a loss to the UK,” he adds. “Manufacturing is low value work. The real value is the intellectual property, all the...” he says motioning to sleek buildings and who knows what goes on inside them.

How to get a job at DysonPlay!01:41

While Dyson’s products might make life easier in the home, its purifiers help clean up the air we breathe, and its dryers eliminate waste and improve hygiene, nothing the company has yet done has revolutionised the way we live.

Sir James says the company is “going to step out” of its current confines and believes batteries, another area Dyson is developing, do have the potential to make those “earth shattering” changes.

Unlike the company’s motors, he’s willing to share any breakthroughs with the rest of the world, as he believes batteries are much more of a commodity.

But Sir James is modest about his achievements and his ambitions, apologising for his “terribly grand sounding” hopes for batteries.

“I’m not on a mission to change the world or make a huge impact,” he says. “I just want to do what we do and do it well.”



