

## Interview

# Brexit 10 years on: ‘Should we offshore back to China?’

Volt's James Metcalfe on whether building UK e-bike production is still the right choice

Jacopo Dettoni

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James Metcalfe (left, pictured with his brother and Volt's co-founder Lyle): 'It was an unbelievable, ill-thought-out decision' to drop the duties on Chinese e-bikes © Volt

Volt's James Metcalfe doesn't regret onshoring production to pre-empt tariff risks stemming from post-Brexit trade arrangements.

"It was definitely the right decision," he says, reminiscing over the e-bike producer's decision to set up domestic production in Milton Keynes, 70km north-west of London, in mid-2020. The facility, he notes, proved to be the right platform to limit cross-border red tape and tariffs, and cater to the needs of the UK's fast-growing e-bikes market.

But breaking loose from the EU and its often protectionist platform came at a risk for young electric mobility players like Volt.

Metcalfe faced up to that risk in early 2025, when the government dropped the duties on Chinese e-bikes it had inherited from the EU.

"It was an unbelievable, ill-thought-out decision. It makes us wonder whether we should offshore production back to China," Metcalfe says.

## Tariff jumping

After setting up an e-bike rental business in London in 2011, the Metcalfe brothers launched their own e-bike brand, Volt. Initially, production was located in China. They moved production to Poland in 2017 to avoid EU duties on e-bike imports from China.

But with all the uncertainty surrounding the final post-Brexit agreement, [they ultimately decided to move production to within the UK](#).



If anything, Brexit showed the appetite for British built products

James Metcalfe, Volt

"The onshoring idea was based on previous discussions of keeping ahead of the curve, limiting tariff risks in a post-Brexit scenario, and there always was the underlying desire to build it all in the UK," says Metcalfe. "If anything, Brexit showed the appetite for British-built products."

Volt's new production base in Milton Keynes opened doors in mid-2020 with a production capacity of about 20,000 bikes per year. The company's domestic headcount soared to about 20 to 25 direct and indirect employees, from just two when production was outside the country.

While the post-Brexit arrangement made it hard to sell e-bikes into Europe, Volt had enough on its plate to serve the British market, which experienced strong growth in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 'Ludicrous' decision

Things came to a head in February 2025, when the British government decided to accept the recommendations from the Trade Remedies Authority — a non-departmental public body which investigates whether trade remedy measures are needed to counteract unfair import practices. This meant dropping the EU's anti-dumping and countervailing duties on imported Chinese e-bikes, with the only exception of folding e-bikes.

In its investigation, the TRA concluded that "dumping of e-bikes from the PRC would continue or reoccur should the measures no longer apply" and that "it is likely that the importation of subsidised goods subject to review would recur if the measure were no longer applied".

It also admitted that small producers like Volt would be more exposed to ending the duties regime than bigger producers like Brompton, the producer of the iconic foldable bike. Notably, Brompton was the only British producer that submitted evidence during the TRA investigation, with as many as 60 Chinese producers and exporters participating.

However, the TRA estimated that both for anti-dumping and countervailing duties, the negative impact on UK producers would be countered by much greater positive effects for retailers, importers and consumers, which would be able to access e-bikes at lower prices.



It makes it harder to compete in the UK [and] in the EU

James Metcalfe, Volt

From his standpoint, Metcalfe believes the measure damages Volt in two ways. "It makes it harder to compete in the UK" as the market gets flooded with Chinese imports that he describes as visually compelling but of inferior quality and safety standards. "It makes it harder to compete in the EU too as we now have a tariff regime that is completely unaligned to theirs," he says.

This whole saga left him with a bitter taste. Volt has just been recognised by HSBC as its 2026's National Family Business of the Year. Its bikes are regularly featured in industry awards series for their technology and design. But the country's policymaking makes him wonder whether he really made the right choice.

"Based on the government's choices, it feels like they are motivating us to not be manufacturing in the UK. I'm passionate about producing here, but it's amazing not being protected in our home market," he concludes.

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