

Gisela Stuart



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The Convention on the Future of the European Union

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Just looking back on the Convention on the Future of Europe, what impression did it leave on you? Did you find it to be a formative experience in terms of your views of the European Union?

Gisela Stuart (GS): Yes, but I think it was formative in two ways. It was formative for me that until the very end I wanted to make this thing work, and arriving at the conclusion that it couldn't. But I think it was also very formative in terms of UK plc's approach to the European Union. You see, for the Blair Government at that stage, Blair being the first Prime Minister and probably the only Prime Minister we've had so far who regarded Europe as a geopolitical strategic tool. And his commitment to the organisation was not a post-World War II reaction. He saw the proposed constitution as a way of shaping Europe.

What's important in that context is a conversation I had with him just before Christmas, before the invasion of Iraq. When the new President of the Council was muted, and all the small countries were saying this is just the ABC plan, as in Aznar- Blair-Chirac, this is just the big beasts wanting to set up something to which they could retire. But Blair drove this because he thought there was something inherently wrong with the geometry, the architecture of the EU.

And I remember seeing him before Christmas and talking it through, and he said to me, 'This is now the most important decision which we have to make.' And I sort of said, 'Oh, you mean more important than Iraq?' And he said, 'Yes, I do mean more important than Iraq, because Iraq's going to happen whatever we do, whereas this we can shape.'

What then subsequently happened is that his determination to focus and shape Europe was overtaken by Iraq and the fallout. I think if you wanted to find the roots of the Brexit vote, for me, it was actually the Iraq invasion and Blair taking his eye off the ball. Because I think Blair would have been the only one who could have potentially taken his Parliament and his party, as well as Europe, on a different trajectory.

UKICE: Were you sent to the Convention with a mandate of what the Blair Government wanted to achieve or was it very much hands off and you were there to apply your own views?

GS: It's important to go with the antecedents. Donald Anderson, as chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, got a commitment out of Jack Straw who was then Foreign Secretary that, when it came to the Convention on the Future of Europe, it would be members of the Foreign Affairs Committee who would be sent. And the Labour Party decided it would be me. And the Tory Party on the committee decided it would be John Maples. Then, the Tory Party decided, no, it should be David Heathcoat-Amory.

So we go off and we, at that stage, are only members. I am then tipped off by a German official that there was an extra place on the Praesidium going. And they said the Praesidium at the moment only had John Kerr there as a Brit and it had no women.

So I started this one-woman campaign, supported by Labour women and by this young German official, and said I wanted that extra place. Number 10 didn't regard that as one of their priorities. But unusually, Number 10 then didn't object to it. And I ended up on the Praesidium as one of the three representatives of National Parliaments and that of course, was a very powerful position.

At that point, it meant that I never represented the Government because I was

reporting back to a newly appointed joint committee in the House of Commons. The Government couldn't mandate me, but I fully worked with them. I would go and just hand over my notes, and I could always go back in knowing exactly what the situation across Whitehall was. In the very final stages of the negotiations, I had an open phone line to Stephen Wall to make sure things were aligned, but of course John Kerr had his permanent open line.

I fell out with the Foreign Office over a couple of things.

One was about what we wanted in the text. I wanted an exit clause. I wanted a proper exit clause on the basis that I said whatever this convention comes up with, I can only get this through the Commons with three things. One is we remove "ever closer union". Two is we have a mechanisms for powers to go up as well as down, and it doesn't matter that you know what you want to be returned from Brussels, you must have a constitutional mechanism to return powers from Brussels back to member states. And the third one was the exit clause .

Number 10 in the end decided to let Gisela have a frolic of her own and not object. What they did object to, which I always wanted, were the traffic lights on subsidiarity. Later this would become Cameron's great achievement! 'We're going to allow national governments to be able to say no.' Well, this was chucked out in the Convention as not being significant.

And the second one, was one involving personnel. The Foreign Office wanted me to take a Foreign Office lawyer with me into the final rounds of negotiations where each one of us had a lawyer with us. I decide to take Speaker's counsel. And the reason why I wanted to take Speaker's counsel, and I could and the Foreign Office minister couldn't, is that Michael Carpenter who, at that time, was Speaker's counsel, was a Cabinet Office lawyer at the time of Maastricht.

So, he could tell me on occasions, 'Ooh, look at this proposal. They tried that one on John Major.' He could tell me 'This is the fourth or fifth time they are trying to do this. I've been here before.' And of course, in terms of one administration not revealing the advice to previous administrations, if I had been a Foreign Office minister or if I'd had a Foreign Office lawyer I would not have been able to have that advice.

There then was this moment, this one phrase in the passerelle clause, which would actually allow for a two-way valve. I've still got the piece of paper where Michael Carpenter drafted the text of that. But I think the key thing for looking back on this, the lessons learnt, is that if you want to have treaty negotiations which are much more open, then the convention actually gave a model because it meant you had a parliamentarian doing the negotiations. The House of Commons and the House of Lords was more involved than it had ever been before, and Parliament could have at that moment taken a different route after that.

Of course what happened is you get the rejection in the referendums in France and the Netherlands, you get the Lisbon Treaty, you get the party politics, and then in 2010 you get Cameron saying, 'Well, the only way to deal with any of this is to just stop talking about it.' So Mini-Corps meetings, where domestic ministers with an EU portfolio talk to each other, stop happening. The notion of a proper Europe Minister goes – i.e. someone who stands at the despatch box and justifies the trade-offs, what at one point Geoff Hoon thought he'd been appointed to.

The agriculture and fisheries debates go because they're now deemed backbench business. Debates in the House of Commons ahead of Council meetings go. And you have from 2010 onwards, not just a Government disengaged, you also have a Parliament disengaged. And remember, between 2010 and 2015 you have the biggest churn of MPs since 1945. So, you've got a whole generation of new Members of Parliament who do not speak Europe and have no means of learning it either.

UKICE: I can see the link between the Convention and the growing sense of Euroscepticism, but when in your mind did that firm up into the idea that we had to leave?

GS: Well, no, it never did in my mind. Being realistic about this, I desperately wanted a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty because I thought the Lisbon Treaty was a real change in the democratic relationship. And what's more a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty would have given you very, very clear options between the present and the future. You make the choice, you either vote for the status quo or you reject the version of the future that is being offered to you in the shape of the Lisbon Treaty. You will not find me campaigning for an in-

out referendum after the 2005 Lisbon Treaty, but on the Lisbon Treaty I wanted a referendum, yes.

And then you get the Cameron referendum, which sort of comes out of nowhere. The Cameron referendum was like the 2005 commitment on the Lisbon referendum. Remember 2005? All three political parties went into the general election promising one, and then all three of them came up with different reasons as to why they weren't going to have one. So Cameron in 2015 promises one because he hopes that Nick Clegg would stop him from having one. But the voters give him a majority. So, he has the referendum, and at that moment I just didn't want to get involved.

And that's why the only organisation I joined was Vote Leave. It was David Owen who essentially took me into a dark corner and said to me, 'Look, if you were Mrs Stuart, a housewife in Worcestershire, it would be perfectly legitimate to not take a view or a stance on what is going to be one of the most significant political decisions this generation is going to take. But you are an elected Member of Parliament. You cannot not have a view on this.'

And that's why David Owen, again, was very important to me when he agreed to join the board of Vote Leave. This was the man who left the Labour Party and started the Social Democrats as a rejection of Michael Foot's policies towards the Europe. So when he joined, I agreed to become the chair of Vote Leave because I wanted a referendum campaign that was not run by Nigel Farage and UKIP. And if the Electoral Commission had decided to designate Leave.EU as the official campaigning organisation for the referendum, I would have fallen silent again.

British politics, 2010-2015

UKICE: When in opposition Ed Miliband decided not to support calls for an in-out referendum. Did you think that was a mistake?

GS: You know, that completely passed me by. I mean, to be fair to myself, much of the Miliband leadership passed me by. When it came to Jeremy Corbyn being the leader of the Labour Party, I think I just became selectively deaf in order to survive the horror that I thought had befallen the Labour Party.

UKICE: I presume you were aware of David Cameron's Bloomberg Speech. Do you think that made a referendum inevitable? Did you think, 'Ah, we've got it?'

GS: Well, no, because I never wanted it – but however, I got it. Again, there is something important which plays into a wider view of politics.

I think there is, in political discourse both here and in many other countries, a generation of politicians in their late 40s and early 50s who actually have a profound and deep attachment to recent history and their predecessors.

So just as Cameron and (George) Osborne played to Blair's *A Journey* book, and literally read it as a bible, the Bloomberg speech and Cameron's approach to the referendum was taken out of the (Harold) Wilson book with some amendments. At least Wilson had the decency when he sent a leaflet to every household to make an equal case for Remain and Leave, which Cameron didn't.

But the thing about his approach to the referendum was that he went back to how this was last handled by a Prime Minister who survived a referendum he didn't really want. So the Bloomberg plan was: let's go and say I renegotiate, set myself some parameters which are pretty vague, come back and say, 'Look what I've achieved,' then make an economic argument, and I win the referendum. Say the Cabinet can campaign in either camp, and I will have won the referendum.

The Bloomberg speech to me was simply Wilson Mark II. My real criticism of Cameron's approach – and it's a legitimate approach – is that he asked for nothing and got nothing.

If he'd come back and said, and this was always at the root of my reason why I ended up coming down on the Leave side, if he'd come back and said that the European Union's expansion, the deepening and widening has exhausted its logical parameters, and this was crystallised by the creation of the single currency. If we continue not to have a meaningful neighbourhood relationship where the only way we can relate to countries around us is by offering them the prospect of membership, then I do think you have to arrive at two kinds of membership.

If he'd said look, as of now the European Union architecture will have members of the Eurozone who share a single currency, who will require deeper political and economic integration. And there will be countries who are not members of the single currency, and that will be a different kind of relationship. It will not just be the United Kingdom and the Danes who were the only ones to have opt out. The Swedes who sort of live in sin, and Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, are these countries going to join the single currency?

So, if Cameron had come back with that proposal of a new architecture, I would have said, 'Yep, okay, let's give it a try,' because it would have gone to the core of an understanding within Brussels that the future cannot continue the way it is now.

UKICE: As the EU Referendum Bill was wending its way through Parliament, did you at any sense worry that the Government was going to rig the thing so there'd be an unfair playing field as a result of the conditions they imposed?

GS: No. I was at that stage on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and I probably spent more time worrying about what happens to our spooks than the referendum bill.

I've got a very strange view on referendums, and full marks to UCL who managed to get, after the referendum, people like Dominic Grieve and Andrew Wilson and me together, and come forward with their proposals on, should you ever really want to have another one, how you want to conduct these kind of things or what the options are.

The Government up to that point had only given thought to the Scottish referendums. Every referendum by its design has problems, just like every voting system has its pros and cons. But I didn't think they would, in terms of the referendum bill, have a problem. What I did not anticipate was that the Government would so blatantly skew the contest. One Government leaflet making the case for Remain they sent out before the spending limits kicked in, which cost more than the entire spending limit for the referendum itself. But if you wanted to draw up a charge sheet, I think the charge against Parliament is there were a lot of things happening, and happened, which maybe with hindsight we should have foreseen. But we didn't, and there we are.

UKICE: As a German in the UK yourself, did you have any particular feeling about whether or not EU nationals should be allowed to vote? Did that give you a view on that question?

SG: No, because I probably take quite an old-fashioned view on choice of citizenship and what comes with it, and I think rights comes with responsibilities. I know why EU citizenship post-Maastricht was such a big step for the European Union. I think the British in their psyche have never fully comprehended just how significant this was for the rest of Europe.

For example, we give disproportionate rights to the Irish in terms of voting, and Commonwealth citizens. There's always that kind of odd inconsistency in the whole system. Given that, I just thought you select the register you use for general elections, and that is probably the most straightforward way of dealing with it. And I still think that the electoral register which we use for general elections is a very good basis for doing things.

UKICE: Did you come under pressure from colleagues in the Labour Party not to campaign for Leave?

GS: It's quite interesting. I'm not sure whether one should always say that about one's self, but I see myself as someone who doesn't gratuitously pick fights. Often I kind of fall silent rather than answer back.

The shock for the Labour Party was really 2005 when I changed my mind. I always had a very good relationship with my whips on anything to do with Europe on voting. We even had a code when something came up which I would really object to. The question was would I vote against it, which I rarely did, or would I abstain, which I quite often did. I would just tell my whip that I'm washing my hair tonight, and he knew, 'Gisela will be going home and not voting on this.'

I would only really vote against things when they had a significant consequence. They've always actually been very respectful and we had a good relationship. The fact that I continued to have a really good relationship with my pairing whip and regional whip through all this time, I think is probably the most obvious sign of that.

UKICE: At that stage, when you're deciding that you're going to campaign to leave, did you have a vision of what leaving would look like, what sort of long term relationship that would mean between the UK and the EU? Did you have any expectations that the Leave campaign would set out a clear vision for the post-referendum relationship?

GS: I think looking back there is one thing which, with hindsight, we should not have done, but I think it was an error which even with hindsight we would make again. When the referendum happened I said to Michael (Gove) and to Boris (Johnson) all during the campaign, 'Look, as of the day after the referendum, I'm back on the other side, mate.'

And this is the problem with cross-party referendums and ownership over implementation, that the organisation which is cross-party and campaigns for a particular outcome of course ceases to exist the minute the referendum has happened, and the implementation falls back on the Government.

After the referendum, I did not anticipate that David Cameron would resign immediately. However, when Theresa May came back and says, 'Brexit means Brexit,' I assumed that the ownership of implementing the result, which would always have to be with the Government, was in kind of good, competent hands. And this is why after the summer break, some of us who were involved in Vote Leave ended up setting up Change Britain as a mechanism for reminding the Government of what this means.

But what you highlight is the difficulty and the problem if you have a referendum which doesn't have clear options, and if you then create cross-party organisations, and you end up with a situation where the side which ends up with the responsibility of implementing the decision actually was the side that was campaigning for the different outcome. And that really is very, very difficult.

The referendum campaign

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Can you talk us through your recollection of becoming the chair of Vote Leave? That's to say what was the process, who contacted you? What were the discussions like? Were there discussions or did you just say yes?

Gisela Stuart: By the sounds of it, I missed all the difficult bits. All the plots, the arguments, the stuff which poisoned relationships before and continues to do so. By the sound of it, they still have not been forgotten.

That was part of the reason why I came in. Both Matthew Elliott and Dom(inic) Cummings had been talking to me in the run-up to this, and before actually Cameron had decided that there was going to be a referendum. And I always said no. I just really, really had decided I was going to give up Europe just as in 2017, I decided to give up Parliament. My career plans are never very successful.

As the referendum is called Nigel Lawson rang me up – this would have been in February or March. Once we knew there was going to be a referendum and that there had to be an organisation that would have to go for a designation. The conversation was taking place in that context. Nigel Lawson asked me to go on the board. He was Chair, he wanted to step down. He had someone else in mind who should chair, a Tory who was a man. I told Nigel ‘You need a board that persuades the Electoral Commission that you are not just a Tory offshoot and is embracing people across parties, then I think I need to chair it. You need a Labour person to chair it. I think you need to have some women on there too.’ I also said we needed to get a Lib Dem onto the board, which we subsequently did.

That’s really how that process worked. Nigel stepped down and I took over as the chair because we just thought that that’s was what we needed to do.

UKICE: During that campaign, who most impressed you within the Vote Leave organisation?

GS: Do you know, I think it is one of the most extraordinary team of people, they were very impressive in their different ways.

I can tell you one little anecdote. I don’t even know the guy’s name, but he was part of the team doing the media operation one night. I was to go down to Broadcasting House, my car had broken down, just by the Birdlip roundabout. I rung up Volvo Assist.

But I also rang up the guy on duty and said, ‘Can you just ring up

Broadcasting House and tell them there's no way I'm going to make it into London?' And he asked me, 'What are your coordinates?' And there was this moment where I just thought: the man on the other end asks me for my coordinates. Now there is no way I would know how to work out what my coordinates are. The fact that this guy asked this question left me with the certainty, that whatever happened, he would come and find me and get me.

And there was a focus to the professionalism. Whether it is Stephen Parkinson, whether it is Paul Stephenson, whether it is Matthew Elliott. I was immensely impressed by Munira (Mirza) who would come in and be part of the debates when we were preparing.

And the two things which surprised me about Boris (Johnson) and Michael (Gove), by the way, is how all the way through, Michael always kept some distance. Whereas Boris, when he came to preparing for the debates, which was actually quite labour intensive, because preparing for the debates meant that we had to be such a team that we could finish each other's sentences, he put in the hours, he put in the work, there was no prima donna, there was hard work. It's a fact that these were teams, there was no one there who didn't bring something to the table. That was the bit which impressed me.

UKICE: That's interesting because a lot of people say of the Prime Minister that he's somebody who doesn't put in the work, but your experience was different?

GS: It was very different, because you have to remember we understood something which the other side didn't. You saw it most clearly in the first of the television debates where you had three strong individuals on the Remain side, each one of them trying to impress the audience with the strengths of their individual performances, and they were three individuals.

Whereas we saw this as the three of us. It was always going to be Boris and me. It wasn't clear or predetermined that Andrea Leadsom would also be part of the second debate. But things happened which made that the most logical step.

But we had to come across as a coherent team representing, by who we were, different aspects of life who said to people out there, 'If they think it's okay to

leave, then it's okay for me too to think to leave.' Because there was this bit of, you know, leavers are not all uneducated Little Englanders. And that required bonding, that required the work to become a team, because it shows.

UKICE: Clearly UKIP was not in Vote Leave but in Leave.EU, and quite a big force in the campaign. Did you have any reservations about being part of a campaign coalition that embraced UKIP?

GS: If you're an elected politician, and as a Labour politician you will on occasions knock on a door in your constituency and the person who says, 'I want to vote Labour,' is also an absolutely ardent hanger and flogger. None of us go and say, "Oh, well, sir, I don't think you're the kind of person who ought to be voting for me.'

My son once tried to suggest something like that when he was, I think, seven years old. It was the first time we handed out leaflets and he saw on one a door someone with dogs. And I told him that you've always got to be very careful delivering leaflets and not get your finger bitten off. Then he said to me, 'Well, can't you just say if you bite my finger off, I won't let you vote Labour?' and I said, 'No, it doesn't work that way...' It might sound like a frivolous answer, but you get the drift.

There is one thing when I look back which sometimes does irritate me, and that is when I get accused of having gone out campaigning with Nigel Farage. There is only one occasion where I was quite cross, but things happen, and that was a public meeting in Sutton Coldfield. I hadn't been told to begin with, and then not until the last moment, that Nigel Farage would be on the same platform. I decided as it was Birmingham, and I'd rather wanted the people of Birmingham to hear what I had to say about Leave than just leave it to Nigel Farage. I did not campaign with Farage and, as I say, if Leave.EU had won the nomination it would have been different as far as I was concerned.

UKICE: But do you accept the idea that Vote Leave wouldn't, or couldn't, have won the referendum without Leave.EU there?

GS: It comes back to the idea that you need a whole spectrum. The Remain campaign needed the pro-Euro federalists, which wasn't their vision either. With these kind of binary choices, both sides will have parts of their coalition

which on their own they would not agree with.

UKICE: What did you make of Labour's role in the Remain campaign, just watching that side? From where you were sitting, was it a great relief that Corbyn adopted the attitude that he did? Were you worried that a more engaged Labour Party could have made a difference?

GS: I gave much more thought to the fact that the reasons why Corbyn, and the group of Corbyn politicians, actually agreed with Leave weren't my reasons for leaving either. I didn't think the European Union was a capitalist conspiracy who would only operate against the interests of the workers.

I just left them to it. When you are in the midst of a very focused, really hard campaign you just note what the other side does and you get on with it. There was just one moment which sticks in my mind. We were operating on the basis 'And what else will they throw at us?' So we were trying to identify the kitchen sink, because the kitchen sink will be the last thing to be thrown. And we kind of thought that Obama's intervention was the kitchen sink.

UKICE: Were there things you were worried they would do that could change the dynamic? Were there things you were relieved the Remain campaign didn't do?

GS: I'll tell you the bit which I never understood. If I'd run the Remain campaign, I would have acknowledged, as subsequently some Labour politicians did, that our decision in 2004 to immediately implement free movement of labour, had actually some really adverse effects on some Labour communities. And I think if you go into John Mann's constituency, or Natascha Engel's, they would find that jobs which were not even being advertised locally and you had a pressure from people who were prepared to work for lower wages and lowered social rights. I couldn't understand why Labour wasn't capable of making that case in a way which was not racist.

I mean, these were unfair pressures on wages, and you have to acknowledge that this is how people felt, and they never did and they never could see it. And similarly when you look at the Leave vote in terms of ethnic communities, you'll find that the strongest Leave vote was amongst those from the Indian subcontinent, and probably also the Sikhs. And the highest Remain vote was

amongst Afro-Caribbean communities, who are very strong in big cities like London.

For the Indian subcontinent community, who'd be second, third generation living here, it was difficult to understand why, when they're wanting to bring in members of their family for a family wedding, they were being made to jump through hoops. And yet, as they would see it, after 2004, whole bits of Europe – and they questioned what that relationship was – would have completely free access. They felt there was something wrong with that. I think there could have been ways to acknowledge that which weren't racist.

UKICE: The other thing it strikes me that the Leave campaign did very effectively was refuse to say what Leave meant. Can you just talk us through the discussions, were you comfortable with leaving the whole thing utterly open?

GS: We didn't do that. We defined what having left meant. We said who would have the final word over borders. People kept saying, 'But you've already got control,' and to which we'd say, 'No, we haven't got control of the rules. We don't make the rules.' That was the thing.

When I took over as Chair, there were two questions I asked. First one was where does the £350 million figure come from. And, of course the £350 million came from the Pink Book. You could then have the argument that it was a gross figure, and actually the proper gross figure should have been £372 million.

And the second one was about Turkey. I said, 'Could someone just do me an up-to-date note on where the United Kingdom Government is on Turkish membership?' And at that stage all three political parties still supported full Turkish EU membership. We were still paying into the funds which were accelerating Turkish membership at that stage, and we'd been supporting them.

David Cameron, who, after the referendum complained very bitterly, was fully supporting membership. People now look at Turkish membership as of 2020 and forget that in 2016 it looked quite different. David Cameron could have brought this to an end by just saying, 'I will veto the decision.' You know, one

sentence could have finished that.

I remember having a conversation with Craig Oliver after the referendum. I said to Craig, 'Why didn't he just say that? One sentence. A whole campaign.' And he could have timed that very well and had massive impact. And Craig just said, 'Well, he just didn't think it would be very statesmanlike.'

UKICE: The flip-side of that surely is that Penny Mordaunt's claim that Cameron didn't have a veto was just a lie?

GS: Or she just got it wrong, I mean I never had a conversation with her whether she just misunderstood it or got it wrong. I don't know whether she knew that. We all go into television studios and have been asked questions and we give the wrong answer because we actually got it wrong. So I don't know. I remember that interview but I actually genuinely never had a conversation with her about that.

UKICE: But to be fair though, the campaign never corrected it, did they?

GS: Well, but plenty of other people corrected it, didn't they?

UKICE: That was left standing, wasn't it, that there is no veto? The campaign didn't say actually, 'She misspoke'?

GS: You could do a media analysis as to the impact and the viewership of that one statement compared to the viewership and the number of statements saying she got this wrong. You probably will find that the assertion that she got it wrong got a higher exposure in terms media minutes than that one interview.

UKICE: Talking of which, do you think both sides were treated fairly and equally by the media during the campaign?

GS: Do you know, I just had no time to watch anything. It's always the thing when you're really right in the middle, you do your bit and you really don't see any of this stuff.

UKICE: But do you remember conversations in HQ about it? Was there a sense of grievance at Vote Leave about the media?

GS: I knew there were some really heated discussions going on about the television debates, and I think particularly the second one where I was aware that there were changes. The original line up for the Remain side would have had Alan Sugar. That's when we had Digby Jones lined up. The Remain side chose not to have Alan Sugar, and they had Frances O'Grady, and at that moment we decided that we would stick with our original team.

So these were bits I was aware of. The one thing which still absolutely sticks in my craw, I have to say, is the leaflet which went out to every household before the spending limits kicked in. The Government spent more on one pro Remain leaflet than the entire Leave campaign spend. It did that just before the purdah, and it was deemed to be okay.

UKICE: I'm intrigued about when you thought 'we're going to win this' during the campaign, and what arguments did you really think were cutting through to the people you were speaking to and dealing with as you toured the country as part of the campaign?

GS: I won an election in 2010 which everybody, including me, thought I was going to lose. We fought tooth and nail and won. And it was in 2010, in my own constituency, that I learnt that just like doing a 100-metre race, you don't pause at 50 and 75 metres and look around and say, 'Oh, do I look like winning this?'

You just go. You just absolutely go until 10pm at night on polling day, and you don't try to predict the result, you don't even allow the team to have a drink until they start to count those bits of paper.

I'm sure there were, within the campaign, people who were checking where we were, the team itself though we were just getting on with things, we were going to give it our best, and if our best in the end meant more people voting for us than the other side, then we had won.

The only thing which I do remember – in terms of things cutting through, I still remember when I had the first conversation when we prepared for the debates and I said, 'We take control,' and Dom said, 'No, we take back control.'

As for the television debates, after the first one, I remember we got together

and we said ‘What’s a good outcome? What do we think is tomorrow’s write-up which we think is a good outcome?’ And I can’t remember now who said it, ‘If they come back and say, ‘God, they were all so boring because all they kept saying was take back control, then we are fine.’”

I mean, this was the point. And then if after that they say ‘I want the final say over my borders, my taxes and my laws,’ even better. All election campaigns and referendums are about summarising a lot of things which people think about. It crystallises things. People think about things all the time, they take things in, and then suddenly it articulates itself into something which sounds, on the face of it, very simple, but it’s actually an aggregation of a very, very long process of decision-making.

This is where people who run campaigns make the mistake, in that they think that you start with a slogan and then you work your way backwards. No. I think the slogan, the key three or five words, have to be a summary of something that’s been going on out there for a long time. You don’t create this in a campaign, all you can do is articulate it. And that’s what that process was really all about.

In terms of winning, the only funny anecdote is that I had a little note which predicted when during the night Gisela would be happy, and when Gisela would be unhappy. And it was based on a prediction of at what time the results would come in. The first ones were the North East, and we had a chart of what percentages we had to look out for if we were likely to win.

When Sunderland and others came in, and were above what we thought we needed, but we knew that between two and three in the morning, Gisela will be very unhappy because that’s when the results from London came in. We knew the pattern of the figures coming in: London would always really pulls things down. But we had a framework which would show us whether we looked like winning or not.

UKICE: Were you at all concerned that quite a lot of the people who were voting Leave might not be voting on the merits of the Remain versus Leave on the EU but were voting because they were hacked off with austerity or hacked off with David Cameron, and saw it as a chance to give him a kicking? Did that concern you at all?

GS: Were you ever concerned that some of the Remainers were voting for reasons which had nothing to do with the European Union? It was about them growing up in the 1970s, when Britain had austerity. I came in 1974 when the United Kingdom discovered amazing things like pressurised showers, duvets, sundried tomatoes and olive oil. And they discovered Italy, you know, holidays in Europe which made them feel oh so sophisticated. And I tell you, there are a lot of Remainers who define themselves at that kind of level of 1970s generated sophistication. Was I worried about them? I wasn't actually, I was fine.

UKICE: Was your campaign specifically aiming not to talk about the economy and to focus on immigration, or do you think that actually you did pretty well on the economy too with the £350m? I mean, the consensus view maybe after the referendum was that Leave went on immigration and Remain sort of went on the economy, but I wonder whether you thought that was true or not.

GS: No, I think Leave won on the basis of community, identity and belonging. But there are some things which require careful consideration. I find it extraordinary that under Cameron we had two referendums which, when you think about it, the implementation thereof, has really been a failure.

You had first the Scottish referendum where he was mightily relieved that he won. He never understood why he won, and rather than after the referendum just falling silent, saying 'Okay, the union, the United Kingdom union is fine,' he makes all sort of pledges and comes up with rather half-baked things like English Votes for English Laws.

And then we have that second referendum which the Conservative Party calls and which he unexpectedly loses, and it has cost them two Prime Ministers. The reason why this is relevant is that having, as the United Kingdom, decided to leave one union, we are now in a deep struggle to maintain another union. And we really have to learn from those last two referendums and the way you behave after them.

At the moment in terms of the work I do, both in the Cabinet Office and in my other capacity, is around keeping the United Kingdom union together. It does not seem to me that people have learnt much over the last two referendums.

UKICE: You were suggesting that Brexit could have been handled in a way that didn't pose a threat to the union that we're now seeing. So I'm interested in what you think could have been done to make sure that a Brexit vote with two of the four constituent nations of the UK voting in a different direction, and with the problems we've seen subsequently over Ireland, what needed to happen to prevent Brexit posing a threat to the integrity of the UK?

GS: I was very struck by the fact that Wales voted to leave. And if the immediate referendum result had been only England voting to leave and all the other three voting to remain, I think at that moment my alarm bells would have immediately started to ring.

I think you could have shaped the debate about returning powers, from agriculture to fisheries to all kinds of things, in a UK-inclusive way. You also need to acknowledge that there is a problem, and the problem is who speaks for England, and that is still very much an unlearnt lesson.

For example, when Covid-19 struck, my preference would have been to have press conferences which have Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and a rotation of the big English mayors, so that when the Prime Minister spoke it would always be on behalf of the United Kingdom. That's the bit which I think there are lessons still to be learnt. A key one being that England takes the Union for granted and that devolution in England outside London is pretty much unfinished business. .

UKICE: When did you first start to think that the Leave campaign would win?

GS: At about 3am

UKICE: On the day?

GS: No, during the night. But I can tell you the first time that I sensed that we might win, and that was the day before the referendum. There's something curious about fight campaigns, and that is, even during general elections, about 24 to 48 hours before, the campaign managers face a big problem, and it's called: what to do with the candidate?

Because the candidate gets more nervous and they can just get in the way,

because all the decisions have been made, but you still want to do things. The same happened with the referendum. Paul Stephenson, who was running the press, decided that I needed to go to the Midlands and the North to do radio and newspaper interviews on the Wednesday. Which of course is completely phony because I could have done them just as well from London. But I knew why he was doing this, I could recognise the symptoms.

Andrew Hood, who was my Labour responsible adult on the premises, and I, we went up and we hired a car in Stoke-on-Trent, and then went to Manchester, Bradford and Leeds. And there was just something about the nature of the interviews. Because this was local media and this were local journalists, and local newspapers we talked to. They knew their patch. Particularly around Stoke, for them it was already a foregone conclusion that Leave would win.

And there was just something about the atmosphere, and both Andrew and I then, on that day, said, 'They're all going to vote Leave.' And that was really the first moment when I thought, 'You know what, this could just be won.'

Something I want to put on record is what happened around Jo Cox. We kept coming under pressure to do something in Scotland, and Dom always said there are more votes in Yorkshire than in Scotland. But finally, yes, I would go up to Scotland, I would do one day's campaigning there.

I left home for Stansted Airport at five in the morning. As I landed in Scotland, I had a message from Tom Watson to ring him as a matter of urgency. Tom said, 'Look, it's not yet in the public domain because all the family hasn't been informed yet, but Jo Cox has died. We're not yet sure who did it and why but there are the first press stories about things that had happened.'

Of course the key thing was that we cancelled everything and I just tried to get myself another flight back – I decided to fly back to Birmingham because it was the only place that I could actually get home from.

And it was one of those weird days. By the time I arrived in Birmingham, all the trains had been cancelled because there was flooding on the lines back home. So I got a taxi and we were on the M5, and Junctions 4 to 5 were closed. I had a day where I started at five in the morning and I finally got home at midnight

and just about everything had gone wrong. In my head I kept thinking, 'Yeah, but you're alive. No, you're alive.'

And after Jo Cox's death, literally people were turning to us saying, 'You have killed Jo Cox.' And I think for us as a team, the Monday of the week before the television debates on the Tuesday was really, really hard, because we all went to Parliament and there was also a special church service.

I had put my name down to speak on the basis that we simply could not, not have one of the three Brexiters speak in the tributes to Jo Cox. One of us had to get up and do that, so I put my name down and made sure that both Boris and Michael were there too. Rosie Winterton, she was the Chief Whip, rang me and said, 'Alan Johnson (who lead the Remain campaign for Labour) had put his name down to speak but if he doesn't speak, will you agree not to speak? And we just make it a tribute of personal friends of Jo?' I said, "If that's the undertaking then I'll agree to not speak." And neither of us did.

And, honestly, for us to go from that Monday and that moment, where we were unbelievably shaken, to then get ourselves back into a psychological space for the Wembley debates on Tuesday night – I can honestly say it was one of the most difficult things to ever do.

When I decided to campaign for Vote Leave, Jo was the only one of the new MPs, who, of course, didn't know why I was generally more sceptical about the EU, who came up to me and said, 'Why are you taking that stance?' And I said, 'I'll send you a couple of articles.'

I sent her the articles and she came back saying, 'I can see where you're coming from but I disagree with you.' I come back to your earlier point, when you asked how did the Labour Party respond.

UKICE: How did you feel that Wembley debate had gone when you came off?

GS: In terms of the Wembley debate, well, what's so hilarious about the debate, and I didn't realise until afterwards, is something had gone seriously wrong with the running order. I opened the Wembley debate, and Boris closed it. So something had clearly gone wrong. If one side opens, then surely the other side ought to close it. It wasn't until weeks afterwards someone pointed

this out to me, even on the night it hadn't dawned on me,

All I can say is I thought we did well. You have to think about your family on such occasions. Whilst I hadn't announced this at that stage I had decided in 2015 that I wasn't going to fight another general election. That was it and I also thought I certainly would never be in Wembley again. I made sure that both my sons came with me. I have a photo which, if you ever want it, I can let you have it, that my son took. It's a lovely black and white photo where I kind of forgot to tell him to leave the room. It was (David) Dimbleby briefing Boris, me and Andrea Leadsom. I felt this was going to be my last public gig in many ways. The kids were there, I thought we did well, and after that it was in the hands of the voters.

After the referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we can turn to post-referendum, I suppose the first, most obvious question is, was there a point at which you were concerned that Brexit might not happen?

Gisela Stuart (GS): Yes. To this day, I don't know exactly what happened between Michael and Boris, and maybe we will never know. Yes, and Cameron going. I found that really, really shocking. But at that point I was an opposition backbencher, this was now the fight for the Tories, they had to sort it out.

UKICE: Following the referendum, did you feel less comfortable as a Labour MP, given the experience of the campaign? Did it impact on your links with the party at all, either personally or practically?

GS: I think it was a continuum of a journey. The Labour Party always finds it easier to forgive a sinner as long as they have lost and can repent. So the fact that I not only sinned but also succeeded made it more difficult.

But then, you have to accept at that moment, the leader of the Labour Party was Jeremy Corbyn. So I had more than one reason for estrangement.

UKICE: Talking of which, I think it's true to say that you voted for the Conservative Party in 2019.

GS: Yes.

UKICE: Do you now feel closer Keir Starmer's Labour Party or Boris Johnson's Conservative Party?

GS: My voting Tory wasn't a kind of conversion, and I hope I articulated that clearly. I got to the point where I thought we now need two things. We need a Prime Minister who actually means to implement the referendum, and for that you need a Government that has got a majority. And therefore, what I voted for was a majority Government with a Prime Minister to deliver Brexit.

I think Keir Starmer is closer to what a Blair Labour Party was than any other leader. And I just hope he gets us back to a stage where we're a party that's electable.

A slight distraction, I did a book review for Matt Forde's Politically Homeless. It reminded of how deep the problems run when you have a Labour Party that allows its leader to trash the record of its predecessor the way Ed Miliband did. And a party that elects what it with hindsight thinks is the wrong brother, because David (Miliband) was so convinced he would win he asked for Diane Abbott to be put on the ballot paper to have a broad spectrum. And for the party then to make that mistake yet again, and this time really gets punished with Jeremy Corbyn...And so Keir has got a massive, massive struggle, but it's a necessary and absolutely important move in the right direction.

UKICE: I know that Covid-19 has completely changed things, but If this Conservative Government turns out to be quite a right wing, would you at any point feel uncomfortable for having facilitated that via the referendum and so on?

GS: You mean any more uncomfortable than I was as a member of the Labour Party that managed to have Jeremy Corbyn as its leader? I think they'd have to do a lot of things before I could feel more uncomfortable than that.

Perhaps that's a very frivolous answer but, you know, you just completely got cause and effect the wrong way round. You seem to suggest that not only am I responsible for David Cameron resigning, for Michael stabbing Boris in the back, for Theresa May running a submarine campaign, for Boris to emerge as

PM. And then, whoever the next leader is, because they would have to be the next one before we have a really right wing Tory Government, to be really right wing and be elected ... You make me wonderfully powerful.

But there is an interesting challenge for the Tory Party and it's the Kissinger question of the Conservative conundrum, and that is that in times of things going well, no one wants to be a Conservative, everybody wants to be progressive and change things, because things are good. In times of tremendous flux, people are more prepared to reflect on the status quo, and I think that's the challenge for the political parties on where they're going next. I think the terms left and right, they may have little meaning for quite some time to come.

UKICE: That's what the question is, I suppose. One question coming out of that is to what extent the Conservatives can now conceivably be seen as a status quo party. I mean that's changed, hasn't it?

GS: Well, the Conservatives have always understood and acknowledged that you're a political party in order to be in government. And if the Labour Party continues down a path of where it thinks that opposition is in itself an aim, we will not be in a good place. It's a necessary condition on the path to perform the role of government again. And in our system you do need an effective opposition to keep the Government's feet to the fire.

UKICE: Obviously, as we are interviewing you, we don't yet know whether the Government will land a deal or not, but it's clear that it's going to be what, in the jargon, would have been a pretty hard Brexit, quite a distant relationship with the EU on a Canada style model.

Is that what you thought was the logical outcome of the election, of the referendum result? Was it always inevitable we would end up with that sort of Brexit? Or did you think this is a relatively finely balanced decision and we could do a sort of softer Brexit?

GS: If I was still in my old days as a lawyer, I would put that down as a leading question again. First of all, we have now spent four years of endlessly bellyaching about what might or might not be. And in those four years conditions have changed considerably, let's just see what happens in the rest

of Europe in many ways as well, and let's just see where we end up.

Too many things – it goes back to the question about a right wing Tory government, and how right-wing it have to be before I feel responsible for it. The fact that so much time was spent going through the motions of finding an agreement without actually meaning it, I think has changed the parameters of the decision making considerably that we'll just have to see. Let's see what we end up with.

UKICE: If I can, I'll try that question from a different angle maybe, what did you expect Brexit to look like on 24 June 2016?

GS: It would have to mean a deal which would at that stage not have existed. But when we asked for a bespoke deal, we were told we couldn't have one. And then when we asked for a deal which was not a bespoke deal, we were also told we couldn't have one.

The bit of discussion which has not been had yet is what right do we have to expect to be treated as a significant neighbour by the European Union? The whole debate has been tainted. First of all, if you had read the European press, you would have spent the first 18 months thinking this fever which led to Brexit will go away, and the British people and the Government will change their mind, so nobody was really engaging with it.

And this was aided and abetted by a number of people, the people who went over to Brussels literally urging Barnier not to negotiate properly. I think with hindsight, this requires some serious reflection. And I think we too have rights as the United Kingdom and an expectation on how we are treated, and we have not got there yet.

The big shift which people, again, hadn't appreciated was between May wanting a deal which involved us changing a little as possible. And after that wasn't deliverable, the Johnson negotiations were ones of saying, 'No, this is the time to really change things, and if we don't change them now they're never going to be changed.' That was the big difference.

UKICE: And do you think the EU mishandled Brexit from 24 June onwards from what is in their long-term interests?

GS: Let's see how the deal ends up with – let's just wait what happens.

I leave you with a little anecdote which was when I came back from Manchester – well, two anecdotes. The first one was my eldest son sent me a text message. I was asleep so I missed the Cameron resignation. I woke up and there was a message 'Holy shit, Mother. You have just taken us out of the EU, removed the Prime Minister, and are about to taken trillions off the stock market. What are you planning for tomorrow?' And I texted back saying, 'Mowing the lawn,' and he texted back 'thank god for that'.

When I walked back into the Vote Leave offices there was this hole in the ceiling. And I asked what happened, and they said, 'You don't want to know.' And I never did find out what happened until I watched the play, where Benedict Cumberbatch played Dom Cummings which, by the way I thought he had him absolute down to a tee.

And this was finally the moment when I had my answer to that hole in the ceiling and what had happened.