

Paul Stephenson



Director of Communications, Vote Leave September 2015 – June 2016

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The lead-up to the campaign, September 2015 – March 2016

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): How difficult, if at all, was it to persuade you to join Vote Leave?

Paul Stephenson (PS): Persuading my wife was the most difficult thing I think. I was working in the British Bankers' Association. I had a comfortable job, comfortable existence. It was interesting work but I had done it for a number of years and was interested in a new challenge. I had known Dom(inic Cummings) for quite a while, not well but we mixed in similar political circles. It's basically the Eurosceptic clan that was founded by Rodney Leach back in the day, probably the Godfather of the whole movement. It was a great shame that he died mid-way through the campaign.

It sounded exciting and I just love political campaigns.

Actually, the thing for me was that I wasn't a Leaver until the renegotiation. I think that speaks to the failure of the renegotiation in some ways. I helped set up Open Europe back in the day. I did believe in EU reform. I was a Eurosceptic. I just wasn't a UKIP-er. And, actually, if you go back all that time, the 'No' Euro campaign was 'Europe, yes, Euro, no'.

The reason Cameron was doing the renegotiation was he wanted to win that swing middle over who didn't particularly love the EU but would stay in if it changed. I did a meeting for the BBA with Dan(iel) Korski and he talked us

through those famous four buckets and it wasn't a huge amount. I remember thinking if this is it, if that's what reform looks like, then there's no other option. If they get this through and they win, which at the time everyone assumed they would do – including me – then the chance of reforming the EU in the future would be lost. I mean it was so painful to try and get small changes, you were not going to get any more reform out of the EU because you'd be firmly on the naughty step.

When Dom approached me we sat in my garden and I said, 'I don't think we are going to win but I do think we need to have a good credible campaign and we need to push it as close as we can because then maybe the flame of reform won't die.' I had become a Leaver but I wasn't a hard core Leaver. I think everyone has been radicalised by the process over the last few years. So, you take a firmer position the more you get into it – and you certainly saw that in the country.

So that is a very long-winded way of saying, 'I was up for it, I enjoyed the challenge.' I knew it was going to be really historic. And what a great privilege for those of us who are interested in history and current affairs and politics, to be involved in a campaign like this that would make history. For the reasons I have just given, on balance, I decided that I thought voting Leave was the right thing for the country and that is why I decided to accept the job.

UKICE: Were you worried what it might do to the Conservative Party?

PS: The Prime Minister and the Conservative Party had a manifesto offering a referendum, that was their decision and one I didn't actually agree with at the time. So, the decision for me was not whether I worried about the party's future, but what did I think was the better relationship for the country with the EU.

Politics is a contact sport and we were straight away saying, 'We are going to have to go for the Prime Minister on this.' So all the Tory MPs were very, very nervous, 'Oh no, no, he is wonderful.' It was very clear he was going to be the figurehead of their campaign and therefore we had to take a swing at him. I mean that's business. They made the decision about whether to split the Tory party or not, and frankly it was a bigger issue than the future of the Tory party in my view.

I remember sitting down at the beginning of the campaign with Mats Persson who used to work with me at Open Europe – I worked with him quite closely for a couple years and we were basically in the same place, we wanted the same sort of outcome.

Yet he was going to work on the Remain campaign and I was going to be on Leave. He said, ‘I think you’ve made a big mistake mate because when you see how great this deal is that we get back, you’re going to feel really foolish that you are on the Leave side.’ I said, ‘Well, I think I know where you are going to get to and I think we’re not the ones who are going to be looking foolish.’ It made me think that evening, have I got this wrong? Is there some rabbit in a hat that they’re going to pull out?

They were using that line on MPs. He’s got this great, great plan. And they got people’s expectations in the wrong place, and that was actually where party discipline broke down – when the deal came back and everyone saw it and compared it to what they had been promised. They said it was going to be amazing and it wasn’t. Suddenly we had 100 Tory MPs come over within a week or so.

UKICE: Were you always confident that you would win the designation as the official Leave campaign, and did it matter to you?

PS: We said we were very, very confident all the way through and I think we were. But I’d be lying if I said you that we didn’t sometimes have concerns and think that if we lose to this bunch of people what does that say about us. There were a few weeks, I guess it was sort of February and March time, 2016, where it all got pretty hairy.

Aaron Banks is an unusual political operative but he was really effective at causing us problems. Until Boris (Johnson) and Michael (Gove) came over and suddenly we had figureheads that everyone else could rally behind, until that moment, it was us just asserting to the MPs that we would have a worse case if we signed up to work with Farage. After a while, they started to doubt that and they wondered whether actually we would be better off just all being together.

There is a logic to ‘let’s all be one team, let’s all be together.’ But good

campaigns are about having a clear chain of command, can be quick, make decisions quickly, react quickly and have a very clear message that speaks to the greater part of the population that you are trying to win over. Having merged with UKIP we would have tainted our brand and would have had even more infighting. All the infights that were happening between two campaigns would have just been magnified because everyone would be sat on the same board. We wouldn't have been able to do anything quickly. Actually, if you look at the Remain campaign that's basically what happened. They sacrificed clarity for a massive consensus and coalition. The stories from the guys I speak to who worked on it say it was impossible to get any decisions through because there were lots of internal arguments.

So we avoided all of that. Dom disagrees with me on this point but I think it's right. I think the designation was actually a clarifying moment – we basically got all of our difficult stuff out of the way by end March into April. And from then on, we just charged ahead and we didn't have to deal with it. Actually their problems started around that time because their coalition all came together after those local elections, and Labour properly started engaging with the campaign. Then you can see their message just totally fell apart because Cameron would come out and say one day 'Leaving is going to do X' and Corbyn the next minute would say, 'Oh no, I don't agree with that.'

We only had two real message carriers in Gove and Boris at that point, but they basically said what the campaign wanted them to say every day and they were the ones who were carrying headlines.

UKICE: Was there a complementarity between the two Leave campaigns in a sense? That Nigel Farage could do and say things that you didn't feel were the things that you wanted to do and say?

PS: People assert that. I've never seen any evidence to prove it. There is no doubt that Farage has a bunch of people that he appeals to, but he turned off a lot more people than he attracted.

I think actually Boris put it best to me and I think it's a very good example of his brilliant political insight. Dom is a data man, he is going to look at it all and think about the strategy whereas Boris is a very 'sense and smell' instinctive person. He said, 'If we have Farage on board this campaign, we are going to

have a smell of stale booze and fags over our campaign and we don't want it.' I think that was a good way of putting it. We would have lost the ability to appeal to swing voters.

UKICE: Things like the 'Breaking Point' poster which Farage could do and you couldn't might have mobilised some people who wouldn't otherwise be mobilised?

PS: As I say, I haven't seen any evidence to back that up. The research afterwards wasn't particularly complimentary about that advert. People were quite rightly pretty horrified by it and I think it was a net negative across the country.

We got pitched that concept by some advertisers and we turned it down. The main campaign didn't do it because we thought it was wrong. It was abhorrent and we didn't think it would be effective. So they went to Farage instead and he did it. That doesn't to me seem to be helpful. It is actually unhelpful.

I think the most telling comment about Farage was his own in a documentary afterwards. He said, 'If we got the designation we had no idea what to do with it.' They genuinely didn't, they didn't have an operation. It was just those guys running around the country. They spent more time attacking us than they did attacking the other side.

UKICE: Was the renegotiation salvageable in any way? One of the interesting things about the renegotiation was that even the Prime Minister seemed embarrassed about it by the Saturday lunchtime. If the Remain campaign had tried to sell what they had got, could have got some mileage out of it?

PS: The thing that killed them was the leak of it, was it a month before? If you look back to the polls, that is when the polls really moved along with all the papers. People are saying now, by the way, that Leave always had *The Sun* and *Mail* on board. When I sat down with *The Sun* and *Mail* at the beginning of the campaign they said, 'We have got to see what this renegotiation is. We're not definitely with you. We can go either way.'

When everyone saw that leak everyone went 'What is it?' We did a pretty good job of pulling it apart and pre-empting any big surprises they might have.

Our strategy was to pull the rabbits out the hat and shoot them before they could.

I think we did a pretty good job of framing it but actually in reality it was pretty weak. I mean there was some good worthy policy stuff in there but it was just not good politics. Then they were a bit hamstrung because they couldn't really come out defending it, as it was still a leaked document. I don't think they did a great job of defending it at that stage. By the time it actually was published, it was done on arrival.

It doesn't take a genius to work out the big issue of the campaign was always going to be immigration and they needed something on immigration. The benefits stuff is just not a big enough number. Yes, don't get me wrong, it was a perceived unfairness of the system caused by being in the EU that they were trying to correct. Fine. But there were loads of questions about whether it actually could work, whether it's too weak. Actually when you put it in the total context of it all, it is dealing with one of the minor parts of what is the bigger issue which is you don't have any control of immigration.

So it's quite telling that in the last two weeks they were sitting there internally looking at whether they could do a big ask on immigration. They were going to call up (Angela) Merkel and Francois Holland and then thought, 'Well actually we're playing into Leave campaign's hands, so we can't do it.' They needed something like that or the kind of sovereignty bill thing they were talking to Boris about. If they could actually do it, you needed something symbolic basically saying, "We now have better control over our laws, or over our borders," or something. Everything else was just a bit too small.

I think what I am trying to say is, 'No, they couldn't have solved it.'

UKICE: There were reportedly some tensions within your campaign. We hear that there was a move to replace Dominic Cummings early on. How serious was that?

PS: That was serious, yes. What I'm saying is, we did have loads of problems but they were all generated by this fight between the two camps. The way that designation works is that MPs hold a lot of the power, because one of the ways the ranking of the two campaigns is judged is who has the broadest appeal,

and MPs are at the top of that tree with councillors and others being an important part too. So they were basically trying to pick off our MPs, and our MPs didn't particularly like the division anyway, and we were quite abrasive as a campaign.

Fundamentally you had the right of the Tory party going out handing out leaflets saying, 'Let's give more money to the NHS.' And they were a bit like, 'Why have we got red leaflets?'

We had a big row about that, as they said 'These leaflets have to be blue.' I said, 'No, we're trying to appeal to Labour Leavers. It can't be a Tory campaign.'

They had lots of gripes with us, which I don't think were right, but everyone thinks that they are a strategist and they've got the right idea. I mean that's why people are in politics. They did a good job of trying to pick those guys off. So, there was a serious move against Dom but I think that died when it became apparent that the rung down of myself, Parky (Stephen Parkinson), Vicks (Victoria Woodcock) and others weren't going to stay if Dom left. And I sort of took a calculated gamble and said, 'I don't think any of my team will stay either,' which was borne out to be true. I think it basically became, 'Right, do we have to just shut down this whole campaign and start again or do we let them stay?'

I think it was decided that that was the preferable option and in some ways we kind of faced it down and we made up with the MPs, and we got into a better place. Then at the time Dom was saying, 'The cavalry are coming, the cavalry are coming,' and he was working hard on Michael and Boris to try and get them over the line and ultimately did. Then that transformed everything.

The thing I would say is that it was quite an interesting anthropological experiment. You've got this huge issue, it's potentially going to change, not only the careers of the people involved, but also the future of the country. And we had a campaign that didn't have a leader.

Fast forward a few months, I remember being sat in Michael's room as he announced he was standing against Boris. In his very grand office in the House of Commons in the ministerial corridor, it felt like civil war. Then within a month

or two, actually less than a month, Theresa (May) had won and the whole party just came straight back into line underneath her. For that first year the Tory party had been riven by division and suddenly we're actually pretty united – until she didn't do so well in the election.

So that kind of thing in politics: of having a symbolic leader, the system of whipping management, all that kind of stuff. It is just so important. We didn't really have any of that. We were just a bunch of 30-somethings in an office saying to these MPs – who by the way have always been rebels, master rebels, that's who they are – and we are trying to say, 'No, we've got to do it like this.' And they've got a different idea. So, it was a bit chaotic, but as soon as you had these senior people, Boris, Michael, IDS (Iain Duncan Smith) was another really important one. It suddenly corralled everyone and it kind of worked.

UKICE: Is it fair to say that you had to blend two fundamentally different sorts of Euroscepticism? There is you and Dominic Cummings versus the Bill Cash approach to Europe and they are very, very different schools of thought. Is that fair?

PS: I don't know whether we actually disagree hugely on the substance with Bill Cash actually. I think it's more the campaign arguments. Those guys have been talking about sovereignty. Bill Cash is a big thinker on the legal system of the EU. I don't disagree with him on much of that. It's just we weren't going to win the campaign by getting QCs to talk about the finer points of constitutional law on the Today programme every day. We had to be talking about other things.

Primarily what this came down to was who was going to be the frontman. So Robbie Gibb, right at the beginning, came to all the campaigns and said, 'We are going to do this massive event at Wembley.' You know the one that happened a few days before the vote? Literally my first week I spoke to him about that. That is, I think, the biggest example of how everyone just started going wild for the attention that they wanted to get. The amount of people lobbying to be on that stage from day one because Robbie had told everyone about it, I think it's just a good example of how everyone saw this as a huge event and also career defining and you can really make your name and all that kind of stuff. In some ways that was true: Andrea Leadsom did go on and it

really raised her profile.

So in some ways actually these disagreements were more I think about who is going to be the face of the campaign, who is going to be the front people of the campaign and who is going to be in charge of the strategy and so on, less so than fundamental disagreements. I think there is a disagreement with the Faragistas who are just more hard line. His kind of thing is, 'These guys aren't Leavers at all. We are the true believers.' There is truth to that. There is a whole bunch of us that would have happily stayed in the EU if it could be reformed. I think that's probably the main fault line.

In some ways, I think the fault line between Vote Leave and Leave.EU is probably the true one. But Euroscepticism had always been about herding cats, or lions if you will.

The referendum campaign, March 2016 – June 2016

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Was the campaign winnable without Boris, do you think?

Paul Stephenson (PS): No.

UKICE: Was it winnable without Gove?

PS: No. I think Gove, Boris and Gisela (Stuart), Dom, potentially Steve Baker, the way I put it is we needed everything to go our way for us to have a chance of winning. I think from around the time of the designation it pretty much did. We had a really good streak. Before that the peak of theirs, which actually didn't turn out to be great at the time, but when they were really riding hard – was the Obama stuff, and on WTO. There was a week or two when they absolutely slammed us. I remember Michael coming in and being like, 'How are we ever going to get back on the front foot,' and our lot all starting to panic.

Then there was this, kind of, dislocation moment when the Number 10 guys moved over into their campaign. It's just things like getting your desks ready and who is going to sit where. You just have boring logistical stuff that just gets in the way I think. They just didn't have anything in their grid and we were

prepared for that. Boris did a big tour of Manchester and Leeds. I said to the BBC, 'We are launching our campaign, you have to run this big tonight because you have given them so much attention.'

I think from then on we were a bit more on the front foot. I think that's the period that we started to hit our purple patch and things went our way.

Without Boris you didn't have the front man who was going to get all the attention. I mean Boris is a political rock star. Sat with him on a train back from Leeds and it is random stag dos, hen parties, that come over, want a picture, can I have a beer with you? I've been on the train with David Cameron when he was the Leader of the Opposition, it just doesn't compare. This guy is a celebrity as much as he is a politician. So that was huge.

I remember chatting to Tim Shipman about a month out, he was saying, 'You don't have enough message carriers. You've only got Gove and Boris and Remain have got loads.' Actually, that ended up being one of their weaknesses – that they had too many message carriers and therefore their message got a bit diluted and they had to use people like Blair who weren't actually that popular.

Actually only having a couple of people taking our message out consistently was to our benefit.

UKICE: What does Michael Gove bring?

PS: So Boris is the swashbuckling hero of the campaign whereas Michael brought over a huge number of Tory MPs. If you go forward possibly to the tension between Michael and Boris at the beginning of that leadership campaign, part of the reason was that Boris's people are a bit like, 'Why is Michael demanding so much stuff? This is the Boris campaign, it's not the Michael campaign.' Michael arguably brought more MPs with him at the time.

I couldn't give you a number but the number of people who we had coming in and going, 'Well, if Michael is going to move-' that's why the amount of pressure they put on Michael not to switch was huge. When you got arguably one of the Prime Minister's best friends moving over, following his conscience, I mean the signal that sends to the Tory party is so important. And he was the

Justice Secretary, so it's very, very difficult for them to go, 'We've got control over our laws,' when the Justice Secretary is coming out saying, 'No, it really doesn't give us control over our laws.'

So that was a powerful signal. Basically he gave permission to a whole bunch of Cameroons to come over. So the likes of Rishi Sunak, when they knew that they didn't have Rishi, this high flying young MP, that's when they knew they'd lost a huge swathe of the parliamentary party.

UKICE: Were you surprised by how many MPs came over to your side?

PS: Definitely.

The other thing about Michael is because of his working relationship with Dom, because he just trusted him instinctively even when Dom was doing stuff that most people saw as a bit more out there, Michael was absolutely imperative to the running of the campaign.

To all intents and purposes he was the main guy sat around the table who was chairing the meetings with Gisela. That meant, as you always do, you have healthy debate about campaign strategy and all this stuff and so on. But, basically, the person running the campaign and who had authority over the rest, Michael, could just go, 'No, I think it's this.' Boris didn't have the parliamentary presence, and he was still Mayor of London at that stage. He wasn't able to be involved quite as much. He didn't have the recent history with these people, and wasn't in the Cabinet. So he probably didn't have quite as much authority.

Frankly that wasn't at that time probably the role that he would have wanted to play, enforcing discipline. The amount of time that Michael just spent doing dinners, coffees, keeping MPs happy, listening to their concerns, all that kind of stuff, is just huge.

Having Gisela on the TV in those debates I think gave permission to a huge swathe of people – like some of my relatives who are Labour supporting, who don't really want to back a Tory campaign – yet you've got this Blairite woman, a German lady who has come over and she is telling them it's not racist to support leaving the EU. It's like she is the antithesis of Farage. She

was a living demonstration that very reasonable middle England non-Tories could vote to leave the EU. I think she was extremely powerful.

UKICE: You were talking about the launch of your campaign and the timing. It coincided with the start of purdah. Were you aware when the parliamentary debates around purdah were happening that this was absolutely fundamental?

PS: At the time we were working very well with the backbench Tory rebels then, so the likes of Bernard Jenkin and so on. Those fights were really important and that purdah win was huge.

The fact that the Government were trying to not have a proper purdah and to exclude the Government from the purdah rules gave us a clear warning about how they were going to play this campaign.

It's been written about – the Waterloo strategy and all that kind of stuff – but it's just basic common sense. Speak to any advertiser, there is a massive degradation in any advertising, any messaging. People forget stuff after a few days, after a week. If we level up the playing field for those last few weeks and it's a fair fight at least for that period then that's huge. That's why I say we needed everything to go our way and that I think was an essential building block.

UKICE: Getting back to Johnson and Gove, particularly Gove, how hard was it to persuade them to go all in on the blue on blue stuff? Gove would have been reluctant presumably to go too hard against Cameron and Osborne, because he had been so much part of that modernisation movement?

PS: I think it was tough. We did do the letter to the *Sunday Times* and that really kicked off a week of pretty tough stuff. None of that crowd – whether it's Cameron, Osborne, Michael or Boris – wanted to go into that campaign attacking each other. The reality is you are fighting a campaign which was a fight to the death. This is the future of the country. This isn't about a few mates. There is the personal element to it but it's the future of the country. It was such a big event and campaigns become so oppositional and aggressive that they all came into it going, 'No, no, David Cameron won't have to resign. We'll all play very nicely.' We're a bit like, 'Fine, if that's what you think is going to happen then fine.' That's what they persuaded themselves going into

it.

The reality is you get into that hard-fought thing and papers will take a comment and make it much bigger. The mistakes that the other side made – and they probably deny it was them but whoever did it – was a series of quite vicious briefings against Michael about Boris and his family and stuff like that. Those were moments which basically antagonised these guys. We were like, ‘You are in a fight now and you are holding back and these guys are going to come for you.’ So you either stand up and be counted ... you are in so deep now, what are you going to do? You can either walk away from it or we fight to win.

UKICE: It was more than personal, wasn't it, they engaged in trashing the record of the Government and the party they were part of. It was quite systematic, wasn't it?

PS: Yes, that's the thing. I don't think either of those guys actually went for Cameron personally but they did talk about the policy issues. I think we were right to. As I say, it's a debate about the future of the country, there are fundamental points here. When I worked for the Tory party in 2010, we had a campaign promise which was literally completely unachievable while we were still in the EU which was bringing immigration down to tens of thousands, when you had no ability to control that whatsoever pretty much.

UKICE: Were you surprised that the other side didn't go quite as hard blue on blue as you had?

PS: I was interested to read after the event (James) McGrory and people saying that they were held back by the Tories, which kind of makes sense. If you are in Government, and you are in Number 10 you want actually to be able to pick up the pieces afterwards. I can understand why they did that. They still went pretty hard.

I will give you an example, the day after Boris came out, I think was the PM's statement on the European Council in the Commons on the Monday. Cameron went for him in the chamber. I don't know if you remember, he slapped him down over the idea of two referendums which he had floated before. It was pretty personal in front of all of his mates. He picked up the phone to Dom after

that and said, 'We need a council of war.'

What I'm trying to say is – if your strategy is we are not going to do blue on blue, then don't do the softer end of it. Either do it or don't do it, really go for them and destroy them or leave it totally. Don't provoke them into attacking you and then tell your people, 'Let's lay off them a bit now.' It was a bit ham-fisted.

I won't name names, but the people running the comms at Number 10 briefed the papers that Michael was definitely in the bag and was definitely coming out to back Remain. What that did was that antagonised a whole bunch of people to get in touch with Michael. 'What are you doing? I thought we were still talking about this.' It was a sort of ham-fisted briefing and Michael feels a bit like his name has been taken in vain. He certainly hadn't given them that undertaking.

It was quite helpful for us because then everyone assumed he was going to come out for Remain and we had a pretty good sense he was probably going to come for us, although it was still touch and go. So, he was a big surprise and a big reveal which really hammered them.

So for all those reason we thought it wasn't smart. I'm just saying there are consequences to doing this stuff. When you are talking about someone's personal career like that. It causes issues.

UKICE: On strategy, did you always have it in mind that you weren't going to define too closely what the outcome of leave the European Union would be. Was that deliberate on your part?

PS: Yes, that was Dom. I don't know if they have been published, but the strategy memos that Dom was writing from the beginning were very clear on all this. I think it's probably all in his blog if you can wade through it. There was a campaign rationale to it which is you look at what happened to the SNP when they published this big document, and it just got torn apart.

There is also I think an honesty element to it, which is at the time we were ten guys in a room and maybe ten or twenty MPs. The idea that we can sit down and write out exactly how these negotiations would go – which by the way has

taken the entire British state several years and we still don't know exactly where it's going to end up. I just don't think we could have done that. So why get into an exercise of saying, 'This is what we think the end result will be,' only to have the EU going, 'No, we're not going to give you that.' The British Government could then say, 'Oh no, that's not achievable.'

Where is the benefit now? I remember actually having a drink with Ameet (Gill) and he said, 'We're just going to keep on saying you have this option, that option. We are going to limit all your options and then you won't have anywhere to go.' I'm like, 'We're not going to say we want an option.' He just looked at me and the penny dropped. I said, 'We're not going to come out for an option. We just want to leave.' He's like, 'You can't do that. You have to define what it looks like.' I said, 'No, no, we're not.'

They were incredulous and he was like, 'This is really unfair, they're not going to play our game here. We've got a well worked out game and why won't they come and play it.' I think that was to our advantage. I mean Boris did talk a bit about Canada earlier on and that kind of stuff but again really as we saw that was all for a future leadership campaign, a debate with the party and then ultimately a general election to decide which way the country wanted to go on it all.

UKICE: Another part of the strategy was obviously the focus on immigration. Was it planned to focus more on it towards the end of the campaign than the beginning?

PS: I think it was unclear whether we would have to focus on immigration at the beginning. In some ways, we went back to the old Business for Sterling Euro campaign playbook, and we spent a lot of time building up our regional business councils, and getting business leaders out in local areas. We knew we were going to get killed by the big multinationals, but we wanted to establish the smaller business voice. So, I could call up BBC Nottinghamshire and say, 'You have to take these truckers.' So they get a big international businessman saying, 'Stay in,' and we get good local voices coming out for Leave. I spent a lot of time doing that kind of stuff. We didn't need to win on the economy. Everyone kept on saying throughout, 'You're losing on the economy, you can't win,' because there was this feeling that no campaign has ever one if it's behind on the economy.

We just needed to neutralise it. We needed to show that there is a split in business opinion. It wasn't all united. The thing about the £350 million was, for normal people, it was about the economy. Some people were talking about recession, we are saying you are going to get money back from the EU. So that was a big focus early on.

In the beginning, we were talking mainly to a set of elite opinion formers at the tops of news organisations and academics. Actually, then we were trying to make more of an intellectual argument. We tried to talk about how the EU was an inflexible technocratic organisation, that it wasn't fit to deal with the challenges of the modern day. Again, to try and get these people to think about it in a different way was a deliberate decision by Dom.

I remember I going in to pitch to a bunch of editors at the BBC about it and Dom gave this pitch – similar to his *Economist* interview where he talked about the regulatory competition in China and Europe in the Middle Ages and all this kind of stuff. That kind of pitch that he had was, I think, pretty successful in winning over some quite senior people to make them think about this issue in a different way. So it's not just about immigration.

Fast forward, I think towards the end it became very clear that the most salient issue when you are doing the research is immigration. If you look back to March time, early April, the Six O'Clock News every night was the Remain campaign saying that leaving the EU would destroy X and then we get IDS on for the last 10 seconds going, 'Oh no, it's nonsense, it's not true, Project Fear.' That was literally cut and paste every single day. We were on the back foot. Whereas we would be able to lead on stuff about concerns around immigration levels, what the impact is going to be on the public services and all that kind of stuff. And then they are responding to us.

You do also get pushed into this dynamic of 'This was working for us, that isn't working for us.' When you have only got twenty days left or whatever, that's what you prioritise. By the end it was pretty much, Remain campaign say this on the economy; Leave say this on immigration. It's a long winded way of saying it wasn't necessarily a masterplan but the way that the campaign evolved, it was a deliberate decision not to go on immigration hard early on because we thought that would turn off a bunch of people that we didn't want to turn off. Frankly, Farage was always going to do that and we

wanted to make Vote Leave more of a centrist proposition, but we always knew that immigration might become a bigger issue towards the end.

UKICE: Surely you must have that date of the ONS numbers at the end of May firmly on your grid from right at the start.

PS: I don't know if we were good enough to have it right at the start but yes, definitely there was a plan and those numbers were in our grid for a while before, for sure.

UKICE: Did anything in it make you feel a little bit uncomfortable? Say the Turkey stuff, did you think that's maybe pushing a little bit too far?

PS: The thing about the Turkey stuff was it was Government policy, it was EU policy. I mean it was one of the things that the Government found very difficult to deal with because it was literally the state's policy. I mean Cameron had made loads of speeches saying, 'We want them in the EU.' Literally it's Government policy. I think every single campaign you have, there are claims and counterclaims and contested points. What they did quite successfully with us was to claim all our arguments were 'lies'. Now I don't think that actually hurt us in the end but it definitely radicalised a whole bunch of people into saying that the Leave campaign was the biggest bunch of liars ever.

Does it feel great when people afterwards go, 'Oh your campaign was based on lies and you are fraudulent,' all that kind of stuff? No. Do I think we acted dishonourably? No, I disagree. I think that those things were successfully weaponised by our opponents which is reasonable.

I mean the £350 million thing, if you go back to what the ONS guy said initially, he says something like, 'This is potentially misleading,' I think those were the words from the Head of the ONS. I now know that Number 10 had worked a long time with the ONS to get them to come out and say something very punchy and the first thing he said was potentially misleading. I think he probably did back it up a month later with something a bit more hard-line but it was an ONS number we were using. We were just maybe pushing the boundaries, of maybe you could have gone to £280m or what have you. It wasn't a lie, it wasn't a made-up number. It was an ONS number.

Then what happened is they just showed a lack of discipline and went for us. Now that has since had the effect afterwards of people going, 'Oh they were just a bunch of liars.' Not great, but during the campaign it was actually probably a net benefit because we spent ages talking about just how much money we give to the EU every week.

UKICE: You are saying that it wasn't strategic brilliance from the start –and there wasn't a plan of 'Let's use the number that can be portrayed as misleading, because that way they are going to talk about it all the time?'

PS: I certainly didn't have that conversation with people. I think that was the effect of it. Had we been strategic geniuses and predicted that that was going to happen? I don't think so. It was definitely a very clear view before I came in which was this is the number we are using, and that was the decision and therefore that's the number we were going with.

I probably thought if there is a bit more argument about it then that's fine but I wouldn't have expected them to go after us as much as they did on that number. I think that was just a lack of discipline and a problem with their massive coalition. It was the Lib Dems, I think it was Norman Lamb, who kept on pushing it – they had so many different people who came for us and they weren't able to control that broad coalition.

UKICE: What do you feel you personally brought to the Leave campaign?

PS: I was Director of Comms, and I thought we had a pretty good media game. I think we built a small but dedicated team that worked its socks off. I think people now say, 'Oh you had all these media cheerleaders who are always going to do your bidding.' Well, that was a lot of hard work. We didn't come in and *The Sun* immediately went, 'By the way we are definitely backing you.' As I say it was six months of work to get them – they were obviously predisposed to us but there were big corporate decisions to be taken here.

There were a lot of people saying to the proprietors, 'This could play very badly for us in Wall Street, it's going to be very bad for our different investments, all this kind of stuff. Our advertising revenue is going to be hit.' And I thought, 'Are you seriously going to come out for us?' I think their heart was with us but their heads weren't necessarily until later on.

I think the way that we dealt with the press was basically we were quite cooperative and gave them stuff, we were quick and provided a good service which I think put us in good stead. I think the way that my team and the research team worked to try and discredit the deal, I think that was important. Whether the papers could have done it on their own is another matter, they probably could have, but I think we definitely helped in that regard.

Then whether you think it is a good thing or not, I came up with the idea of 'Let's have a bus that takes Boris Johnson around the country and we'll go out to the people.' My reasoning for that was they are going to have the Prime Minister who has the security detail, who has to be a bit removed from the people. He is probably going to do his standard stuff of going to a business, having 30 or 40 people, take some questions, do a bit of speech and what have you. So we want to be the people who are anti-establishment. We are rising up and so Boris is a rock star, we want to attract loads of people. Let's have him out with the people and it will be fun and frolics and a bit of a rollercoaster and stuff will go wrong but it will be a bit more real.

Dom always quotes Reagan saying, 'Just turn off the sound and look at pictures,' that's how much people interact with the TV news. You're sat, chatting with your kid, having dinner or whatever and the news is in the background. You just have pictures of us out there with the people – similar to what Corbyn did the next year in the election – and you had a Prime Minister a bit removed. I think just that symbolically was very, very helpful to us.

UKICE: Did you decide it should be red?

PS: Yes. My idea was to use the Boris bus. So we were talking to the Wright Brothers in Northern Ireland about trying to get one of the Boris buses and it wouldn't have worked. It would have been a stupid idea but that was the original plan.

UKICE: Everyone called it a bus, didn't they, everyone called it a bus anyway.

PS: Totally, and actually having a proper campaign bus is much more appropriate rather than trying to get around on a double-decker that wouldn't have been suitable at all. That was where all that came from. The decision to use red was a decision early on – which was we cannot be the Conservative

campaign. Well, we need to do everything we can to demonstrate that we are broader than just a Conservative campaign.

UKICE: How much did you have to do with broadcasters just to get you treated fairly?

PS: A lot.

UKICE: Was that a struggle?

PS: Yes, I mean the discussion early on was look, they have got all these huge names – and by the way they are going to be even bigger names coming out, David Beckham will come out and all that kind of stuff. If you are going to basically say we have got a big name therefore they can get the best slot on the Today programme, and you are only going to give me a small businessman so you probably don't even get on. I was just like that is not going to be a fair fight. The whole point of this campaign is it's the little people rising up against the big people. So you can't use your standard thing of 'Well we've got the Prime Minister versus you've only got Justice Secretary', we have to have equivalence.

Arguably we never actually won that. The classic thing early on was you would have the head of Siemens or the head of BT or whatever on the 6:20am slot, the business slot on the Today programme and they drop in at the end, 'Oh by the way what do you think about Brexit, do you think we should leave?' They go, 'No, no, it will be very dangerous.' Splash a load of papers, top line on the BBC, and it was just cheap. Obviously, I understand why they are doing this, they are just trying to get a decent line for the day. I was just like you can't keep on doing this, because you won't take our SMEs on that slot. If you argue we don't want a trucker from middle Britain, we want a big name, then we're just being denied coverage every single day.

I said, 'Look, it is going to be small businesses against big businesses,' so we were just trying to seed that early on with people. Of course, it was difficult, that's the thing with the messaging. We were like, 'We have got Andrea Leadsom, who is a junior energy minister and she wants to come on.' They're like, 'Well we've got the Prime Minister.' That was tough.

As I say, that was why the purdah thing was really important, because by the end we started to get equivalence and we had Boris and Michael. Again, part of the reason why we then started to maybe go a bit further than they might have expected is because you are trying to generate proper news for people. You are trying to set out the full consequences of it and the big, big difference.

UKICE: People like John Longworth presumably then turned out to be quite important to your cause?

PS: Yes, John, exactly. So the one thing that we did early on was it was very factual. I spent a long time by the way stopping people attacking the BBC. I was just like if we basically get in to a massive row about the BBC the whole time, it's just the Eurosceptic play book of old. It would just turn people off and these guys are so important to the campaign. If we are literally just moaning about them the whole time then we are just annoying a whole swathe of people that are actually quite helpful to us. We need to have a bit of hearts and minds here.

I was saying to the BBC guys, 'We are not going to attack you as a campaign. Some of our people will inevitably but we are not going to, but I do want to talk about balance and we are going to be on at you about balance.'

So we recorded every major BBC programme and at the end of the week we sent a note. So Lee Cain, who is now Director of Comms at Number 10, sent a note to the seniors at BBC and ITV and Channel 4 and said, 'You're giving the Remain campaign this many hours this week across your main programmes, the six, ten and the main political programmes. You have given us this many.'

UKICE: You were stopwatching it?

PS: Yes. At the beginning the discrepancy was quite large. They had reasonable things which was 'The OECD have come out today and said this. The President of the United States said this, we have to cover it.' I understand that, but I was saying, 'Yes, but we just want equivalence over the campaign', because they would always come back – the classic thing from a producer – is to say, 'We don't need to give you equivalence in the same programme. It doesn't have to be balance in the same programme. We balance over a week.'

We balance over a month.’ Okay, cool, we take you at your word. Let’s look at it over a week, let’s look at it over the month and let’s look at it over the whole campaign. So by the end you start to see those numbers equalise a bit more. It wasn’t confrontational, it was just factual.

UKICE: Were you surprised how successful you were with the broadsheets and can you give us a hint as to the work that went into getting those broadsheets that support you to do so?

PS: Were we? We had the *Telegraph*.

UKICE: It was *The Sunday Times*, wasn’t it?

PS: *Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*. We didn’t have *The Times*.

UKICE: No, you had *Sunday Times*, *The Times* went the other way I think.

PS: Yes, *The Times* went the other way, so that was a good example of the editorial team of *The Times* guarding their independence quite fiercely.

The Telegraph I think was one of those ones that was most likely to be in the bag from quite early on. It was conceivable at the beginning that we would get *The Telegraph* and *The Express* and no one else. That’s what we were worried about. If we didn’t have *The Sun* and *The Mail* helping, churning out stuff every day, that would have been real problem for us.

Arguably one of the problems for the Government was their strategy only worked if they had the tabloids doing their hard work for them every day. James Forsyth described it to me as it’s kind of like the forward pack in a rugby team just pushing forward every day and you need that drumbeat in the media, the scrum driving forward of the tabloids. So that was big for us.

The Sunday Times, I think it was just that the editor was instinctively for us. I think there was a split. I think the editor was for us and some of the number twos weren’t. Their leader column on the Sunday, it wasn’t a full throttle, ‘Let’s Leave,’ it was more on balance this is the best thing to do. I think it was from memory a bit of a, ‘Well, reform hasn’t worked and therefore even if we end up staying in the EU at least we had a better chance of reform,’ I think is

where they came out with. Quite a nuanced position.

To be honest, *The Sunday Times* is a good example of where it was quite clear early on that each week Craig (Oliver) was going to give them something and I was going to give them something and the better news-line won out and they splashed whichever one they thought was the better story.

I don't think we got favourable treatment from them. I think, looking back, they had a splash every single week and they got a decent number of them and we got a decent number of them. But we prioritised *The Sunday Times* at points because it does have the cut through into the Sunday programmes and all that kind of stuff. The Marr sofa paper review and the front page of *The Sunday Times* is one of those things that does help to define the day. So we worked hard on that, giving them stories and there was obviously some, as you would in any campaign, interaction with senior politicians.

UKICE: You were talking about the national broadcasters: how much influence do you think you managed to have on the local news and how important is that as a counter balance?

PS: As I said we built up a regional business council network, or rebuilt the regional business council network, and we had local PR people in place in pretty much every region I would think by about January. As you would expect there was a mixed level of success with that but in some of our key areas, like the Midlands and the North East, we were doing pretty well.

The reality of the campaign is that we just did not have enough resource internally to do tight control of everything, given the complexities of our support base and all that kind of stuff and our MPs and all that. I said to Dom quite early on, 'We can't get into getting everyone to have high message discipline, it's just not going to work. We don't have the tools to be able to do it and also we don't have the authority to do it.'

So it was kind of let a thousand flowers bloom and so by the end we knew we can control our message through advertising, we control our message through our main message carriers but a lot of the other people would be going off and saying the things that they thought were best. They obviously had our messages and lines to take but it's difficult to programme all people.

I honestly don't know how much success we had on the regional broadcasters. I think we did pretty well. There certainly wasn't like an institutional push to give these people loads of love and stuff.

UKICE: Do you think the national TV debates made a difference?

PS: There was a big drama around them. So if you're talking about when the souring of relations between that top core of set of politicians who were at the head of the two campaigns happened, I think the debates was one of the things that caused that souring a bit. They'd obviously been incredulous that we persuaded Michael to do the first one. Again, I think at the beginning he did not intend to do that but when it came down to it, it was like 'Do you want to win, who else is better placed to do this first debate?' That's what got him to do it, he agreed, 'Yes, I get that I am the best person to do it.'

That first one was going to be an intense detailed run through all the arguments and Michael is so eloquent.

UKICE: The Faisal Islam one?

PS: Yes, the Faisal one. We were pushing very hard for it to be him against the PM because frankly the psychodrama of it all helped us. Quite bluntly, David Cameron's popularity ratings plummeted that year because we were going for him. The MPs were very wary – we were attacking the leader of their tribe. I mean Peter Bone stormed out after a briefing to *The Mail on Sunday* about Cameron being toxic. That was actually one of the things that caused one of the fundamental splits in our campaign. The reason why that week when we did *The Sunday Times* stuff about immigration saying that they had lost trust of the people, then we did the points based system and that kind of stuff – that mini manifesto – the reason why that took off was because everyone suddenly went, 'Oh wow, this is the next leadership of the Tory party. This is the future of the Government.'

We did a draft Queen's Speech and stuff just playing into that. We didn't have that much to be able to dominate the day but the one thing we did have in our favour was it was quite possible the Prime Minister was going to lose. It was quite possible that the Prime Minister, lose or win, was going to have to go. So a lot of the lobby were starting to say, 'We're getting a bit bored of this

referendum. We are interested in who the next Prime Minister is.’ And so, if you are playing into that kind of stream of thought, then of course it’s like, ‘Oh wow,’ alternative government. Suddenly that became a thing. So, doing the debates and playing up to that was quite important.

I remember saying to the people in the 2019 election, how many debates have actually changed the course of an election? The only time I can remember a debate really taking off and setting alight public opinion was the first one in 2010 which I went to with Cameron. That then dominated the next week. Everything was just about ‘Cleggmania’. Then we hit back quite strongly against the Lib Dems.

The debates were the centre piece of that election campaign. Actually it sucked the life out of everything else and there was absolutely no election campaign because of it, as it was all about polling and Nick Clegg. Since then, they were basically always score draws.

As I say, I think having Gisela on the stand, giving a really prominent position to this very reasonable Labour woman was really powerful. I thought Boris knocked it out the park at the end of the Wembley debate with his speech on Independence Day. So that clip can’t have hurt at all.

The one that I thought was really interesting was Cameron on the final Sunday and how hostile the audience was to him. I don’t know if you remember that. It was a demonstration that they weren’t in a good place. He was their main asset and he got a really rough ride and that was prime time Sunday evening.

I say I don’t know how much impact they made but we spent so much time on the debate, the shenanigans around the debates and all the stuff that was going on with who was going to be on our side, and the massive fights we were having as broadcasters trying to get our people on. There was the thing with ITV – where ITV refused to take our spokespeople and would only take Farage and all that kind of stuff. Then, Number 10 had a very, very good strategy of trying to bully everybody into saying, ‘You will not get the Prime Minister on unless you do what we want.’

They won it with ITV. We kicked off massively. We then found out that the BBC were thinking about going back on their promise to us and that is why they then

did the Cameron thing. They created this extra debate to try and put Cameron on at the end. So that last Sunday was the highest viewing figures of the campaign in the last week. I mean it was pretty outrageous. They thought it mattered. They put a lot of effort into it and used a huge amount of political capital to bully people. So that's why I was saying it's quite interesting that last bit: this was supposed to be their big moment, and actually the audience was really hostile to Cameron and so arguably it could have backfired a little bit.

UKICE: On the day of the referendum, did you think you had won?

PS: Yes, but it's like watching a cup final and being one nil up. It's an important game. You think you are ahead, you think you are going to win but you are intensely nervous because it's very, very possible stuff can go wrong. It's the best way to describe it. I mean there are all these truths in politics at the time, the betting markets are always right, the financial markets always know what's happening. The phone polls are always right and then my guys on the ground are going, 'We got people in our areas voting like we have never seen before.' We are getting our MPs texting – I was on a WhatsApp group and MPs are texting saying, 'There's this whole council estate in my patch every single person is voting, they have all put there-' we had a leaflet you can put in your window saying, 'I voted Leave.' It's like, 'They've all got them up in the streets. These places never ever vote. We're going to win, we're going to win.'

So our ground people were like, 'We think we have won.' And so that's what I was saying to the journalists, 'We can't be sure about this but we think we are ahead.' Then we started to get the indications early on and we were then running the numbers against the model of Sunderland and so on and we were ahead of where we needed to be. So we were like, 'I think we are going to do it.'

Everyone in the office was getting excited and then the London results come in and they're big for Remain. So the stats guys went off and took a look and that's a nervous half an hour and they came back and said, 'Fundamentally the numbers aren't big enough in London, there just aren't enough people in London to counteract what we have in the rest of the country.'

That was the thing. If London and Scotland had voted at the levels they should have done, the turnout they should have done then Remain would have one. They didn't turn out.

The guys did some numbers, they looked back through old voting turnout numbers, I don't know who publishes them, but Government numbers and did some big polling exercise and they got numbers and came back. They just showed us a map of the country of where Leave was going to win and where Remain was going to win and where the high turnout areas were traditionally and where there are the low turnout areas. That was in January, February time. I remember talking to some journalists on background, I said that basically made me think we could win.

So that's the first time I start to go, 'OK, maybe we are going to win this thing.' That's why, when we had all the problems around the leadership of the campaign, I felt we are starting to get there, the strategy is starting to work and suddenly we've got everyone questioning the strategy at exactly the same time. So that's frustrating.

Then, I think it was it about a week before, we got the Ipsos MORI/Evening Standard poll which had us 10 points ahead or something. It was crazy. That was one that was always the most against us. I remember sitting with Dom. I was like, 'Wow.'

Then it was, actually, we don't want it to be this far ahead. We need to be the underdog and we want it to be tighter than this. And then obviously it did tighten and you are like 'Argh, I want it to be a bit further ahead.' In that time, we thought we are ahead and we were worried about letting it slip and that's why obviously the murder of an MP, horrendous, and you have these moments in campaigns where – similar to during an election campaign – an awful thing has happened and you must think about the political consequences of it. You have got to do your job, you are a professional.

Dom was very clear this won't make a difference. There was the Swedish Foreign Minister who got killed during the Euro campaign. He was like all that did was basically freeze the polls where they were and then the campaign restarted. I think the same thing will happen here. A lot of people were losing their heads that day.

They were like, 'We're done for. We're screwed.' Fundamentally we did a lot of focus groups and stuff and people didn't associate the two. I mean, obviously everyone in Westminster was trying to lay the blame at our door in a soft way. But the research showed that most people thought that the guy was just disturbed and deranged and it's an awful thing but it's nothing to do with the campaigns.

After the referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Lots has been made of the shell shocked press conference, which underlines that Boris Johnson and Michael Gove never really expected to or wanted to win. What's your take on that press conference?

Paul Stephenson (PS): So, big caveat at the start of this is there was a plan for what happens afterwards. You've got to remember that was only the first campaign. The next campaign that had to be won was the leadership campaign. We did have an idea of what we will do in the negotiations. Dom would basically go in and refuse to trigger Article 50. Try and negotiate with them in different ways. Basically, stop playing ball with the EU. Maybe start doing some stuff that is constitutionally difficult for the EU.

He would try and raise the temperature. He had a plan, he had an idea to do it, but we didn't spend that that much energy on it because we had to win another campaign afterwards. There were discussions between Michael and Boris about what would happen and we thought a deal was done and basically the Leave team would go on and run a leadership campaign. And then things fell apart.

I think the thing that threw Michael and Boris was Cameron resigning, which to me was just obviously going to happen. I called Ameet at about 6am, Michael was standing next to me and I said, 'Mate, I just need to pass a message from Michael to the Prime Minister, you can't trigger Article 50. Literally you can't do that, it's the worst thing that can happen now because the country isn't prepared.' He said, 'I hear you, I hear you, we're doing a statement soon. I hear you,' basically don't worry.

So I just assumed he was going to resign. I don't think they were both

prepared psychologically seeing their good friend resigning and feeling responsible for it and all that kind of stuff. I just think that was the thing that shook them.

I think once you have 100 MPs out against your position, I mean there is no way he was going to survive. So it would be much better to go with dignity I think was their decision. I think that's right.

I guess that really brought it home for the guys. Then there was a thing of the tone, you couldn't be triumphalist. So normally it would be like, 'We won, amazing.' But they had just seen their good friend resign, so that's a very, very difficult balancing act. We probably didn't get the tone quite right.

The final point is we had spent no time thinking about what we would do the next morning. We spent the entire time thinking about winning, Dom was literally saying if people had started thinking about afterwards the campaign would have run into little leadership campaigns forming and people thinking about parties. Dom was like, 'We only care about 10pm on the night of 23 June, no one thinks beyond that. We have thrown everything at it to win.' And that was the message that was drummed into everyone, day after day after day.

So arguably we probably should have, a couple of us, sat down and gone, 'If we do win, what's our plan for a big thing?' So it was a hastily cobbled together press conference, statements were written. People were a bit shaken, everyone was knackered and then we probably didn't get the tone quite right I think is fair.

UKICE: For you was winning the referendum an end in itself or was it for you- did you say, 'Okay, right now let's go on and do this thing. I want to be in Government?'

PS: I didn't really want to be in Government particularly, although that might have ended up happening. Winning the referendum was the big thing. I was part of the project, and the project needed to win the referendum otherwise it was dead. Phase two was basically taking the 'alternative government' and putting it into being an actual Government.

The 'alternative government' was probably one of the best weeks of my campaigning life. I remember Norman Smith doing a live, who said these guys are on the ropes and suddenly they have come back swinging and they're landing punches. Having gone through that, to then be back on the front foot, felt pretty good. So, if we can then make that happen in reality that would be great. But it became very clear within two days of the leadership campaign that it was falling apart.

It became very clear quite quickly that the team around Boris wasn't going to be the Leave team, it was going to be MPs and it was going to be CTF (Partners) and we were seen as evil Goveites even though I had never really worked for Michael before.

The main issue was that Dom said, 'I am not going to be part of any campaign. I need to take some time off and I promised Mary I'll take time off.'

For me, Dom is such a pivotal figure that him walking away you basically lost the guy who could bring together Michael and Boris and get them to work together brilliantly. When he steps away and takes with him the convening power that he had and the authority he had, no one else can replicate that. So basically the thing fell apart.

I'm not blaming him and it was totally understandable that he promised his wife that he needed to take time off and he was spent as well. I mean we all were, but everything was on his head. If we had lost that thing, he would have been vilified by everyone forever because we were doing what he wanted to do because that's the way he works, and he was right. But therefore the cost of losing is actually much higher if you have told everyone 'I am right on this stuff.'

You could see that pressure on him in the last week or so. You could really see it. Dom was pretty superhuman in terms of not caring too much about what people think about him, but that was huge amount of pressure. He cared about it. I mean it's something he desperately cared about.

The effect of him leaving was basically everything falling apart and then there was jostling for position and all that kind of stuff. You think the principals have agreed that they are going to work together, and then actually the camps

around them are pulling it apart and then what happened, happened. Dom was absolutely, categorically not involved in the Gove leadership campaign. I think we were all on a call early on the day it happened. But the idea that it was a Dom Cummings genius plan, not at all. Which is why he is now working with both Boris and Michael again.

I think you just have to see how the Boris machine changed on day one from the 2019 leadership campaign, to in Government having a clear strategy plan and focus. That is Dom. I mean it's just what he does.

UKICE: What was the big difference between 2019 and 2017 in terms of the leadership campaign for Boris? Why did he so easily coast a victory in the second one?

PS: I think context and MPs. So I was helping Dom(inic) Raab. We were ahead earlier on, I'm confidently told. I never saw numbers but we were ahead. A lot of our MPs were like, 'Boris is finished.' I was like, 'I wouldn't be so sure.'

Then the European election result was very dramatic and we basically flat lined from there. We had some people come in. We lost people as well and we never got going. The logic, which is actually borne out to be true, was that Boris told people 'I am the campaign winner and you need me and this is the future of the Tory party, it's the future of the project, it's the future of everything because we lose that election and we're screwed.' That was just too compelling.

I think there was also a young cardinals not voting for each other and voting for the older pope. It was a weird campaign because the Brexiteer was always going to win so we were in this very competitive lane. There were two sides of the Wimbledon draw and we were up against, in the end, the number one seed and we got knocked out. Actually, if we had been ahead in that contest we would have beaten everyone else because there is no way that Hunt would have beaten Raab in my view.

So that context is important. Then, secondly, the MP operation not having his campaign manager come out and say he's going to run against you as well.

UKICE: It's always helpful.

PS: When Gavin Williamson was fired from Government that just transformed Boris's operation. Suddenly you had him and Grant Shapps, a former Party Chairman, and they knew everyone. They had the power and the status to bring people over. So, if you think about the Raab campaign, we had Dom who had been Brexit Secretary for a short time. We didn't have anyone on the campaign who could be the big beast speaking to other big beasts. David Davis came in, but he wasn't as current. Whereas you literally had part of the whips operation calling up people being, 'You should back Boris.' You had senior Cabinet members talking to other senior Cabinet members and doing deals.

Once you start to get that agglomeration of the big boys all backing someone it is quite difficult to beat. Fundamentally they ran a brilliant parliamentary operation and I think that was the main thing. Then really it was a coast through. They wouldn't see it as coasting but they were ahead with the party and they stayed ahead the whole time. Hunt might pull back a little bit, but he was never going to beat a Brexiteer. Hunt couldn't get over the fact that he backed a second referendum and he didn't believe in Brexit. You needed someone who believed in this project. It was pretty much a destiny.

UKICE: When were you first approached to actually get involved in the 2019 election campaign?

PS: Probably quite soon after in the summer. I made it clear to people I didn't want to work in Government but very happy to help on the election campaign.

UKICE: Was that because you saw it, as you say, as the future of the project in some sense? It was a Brexit election and you just had to get this done for the whole thing to have worked?

PS: Part of the reason I took the Leave job was because I just love campaigning. It's great. It's just the adrenaline rush of pushing the big stories and being part of history. There is that personal part of it. Then of course we have all spent so much sweat, so much blood for this, we've got to get over the line.

UKICE: How much of the 2019 campaign was won in 2017? In other words, how much does Boris Johnson owe to Theresa May?

PS: I have seen some former May aides make that claim. I think it's a bit much. Actually I think some of those trends have been happening for quite a while. If you look back to the Sedgefield majority, it's been dropping ever since 1997. A lot of the Labour Leavers left the Labour party when Ed Miliband was in charge because they didn't agree with his party. So there are those long-standing changes.

Of course, it was very helpful that we had a toehold in certain areas in the North West and stuff where an operation had been built up over time, so you had candidates who had fought there a couple of times, 100%. Whether that's Theresa May ... we could give her some credit I suppose.

The 2017 campaign was a disaster. The 2019 campaign was a triumph. The reason for that was you had a principal who knew how to campaign and deliver messages. You had a very good clear command structure. Isaac (Levido) was in charge of everything. He demanded that and he was given that by Dom and completely respected it throughout the campaign and never once basically had it renege on him. We had a team that worked and was united and we had quite a good array of different people who came back in. It could have been terrible but actually we just slotted in and it worked really, really well.

We knew what our key messages were and we hammered them and Isaac and Brooksey (Michael Brooks) and that lot got the frame of the campaign absolutely bang on. By the way that was super hard to do because I remember being sat with those guys in a late summer, we didn't know whether we were going to have a deal or not. We didn't know whether the election was going to be before or after the deal was done. It was really, really tough.

Then when it became clear that actually the election was going to happen before Brexit got done and actually in some ways that might be helpful to us because there is a whole bunch of people that probably would never vote Tory but might do if it was to get Brexit done then actually that's when the strategy really started to click in.

I remember chatting to those guys in the summer and they were saying, 'Our strategy is going to be: we are going to push so hard to get out come what may and the other side are going to have to do something pretty severe to us to try and stop it. If they do that, we're then going to be able to smash them in the

election because they will basically have shown they do not believe in democracy.' Of course, that was a very hairy period and a lot of Westminster started questioning the strategic logic of what Number 10 were trying to do.

Actually defeat after defeat in the Commons made the PM stronger in the country. Then Labour launched on the Saturday and we did it on the following Wednesday. People were like, 'You vacated the playing fields. It's the worst ever Tory election campaign, what are you doing?' Isaac was like, 'They've got to understand the framing of the campaign.' The framing was when he stood outside the front of Downing Street and said, 'Parliament has been stopping the people from being able to do what they want and this cannot go on any longer. It's a broken parliament and that's why I'm now dissolving it.' That had to be the launch of the campaign. It doesn't matter we lost a few days in the grid. That had to be the launch of the campaign.

Then from then on it was 'We will get this done and then we can focus on your priorities.' It was just a very, very good framing. Just a final couple of thoughts from me on the election, the point where it got difficult was the manifestos, basically it was a change election. The genius of the strategy of Dom, Isaac and Boris and others was getting Boris to be a change candidate, when actually we had been in power for nine years. When Labour started promising everything for free, people were quite attracted to that. That was when the polls started to narrow, and we had to get it back to Brexit and we had to remind people that nothing can be done until we solve Brexit. That last week we managed to do that and I think that was when we start to see the polls turn again and we weren't looking back.

Our data was showing a decent majority all the way through but everyone was so scarred by 2017 that no one believed it.

UKICE: You talked about the skills required to run an insurgent campaign. How effectively transferable are they to running a country?

PS: The honest answer is that I don't know, because I'm not in there. I think the running of the country in the first stage of the pre-Brexit, pre-election stage was effectively a campaign. So I think it actually was quite transferable and I think they were effective and it was noisy and it was bumpy. I think, actually, if you look back now the way they ran the Government then delivered the result

in the election.

It was also by the way quite difficult to recruit people into that Government then. I mean you're saying to people, 'We haven't got majority, we might not be here for more than a few months, do you want to leave a well-paid job to come and work for us?' I mean a lot of people will just instantly say no. I think they are going to build up the team now. It takes time, if I look at the big figures that I worked for it took them about six months to a year to get to grips, it's just a huge machine.

They are starting to do the sort of stuff they want to do and bring in the reforms they want. That's a year in, they are starting to now make those changes. Those things will take time but I think they have got enough people with enough experience of Government. Slowly but surely, they are going to take a grip on the machine and get it to work in the way that they want it.