

Julian Smith



Secretary of State for Northern Ireland July 2019 – February 2020

Chief Whip November 2017– July 2019

Deputy Chief Whip June 2017– November 2017

Government Whip May 2015 – June 2017

20 July 2020

The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): We're just going to start very briefly with you as a backbencher from 2010. Were you surprised by the way in which the Europe issue emerged and was handled, with David Cameron as Prime Minister in the coalition. Having said he would not 'bang on about Europe', by the end of that period the Government was fighting an election with a commitment to an in/out referendum in its manifesto?

Julian Smith (JS): I suppose if you just take it back even further to Tory Party selections, even though David Cameron in 2010 was projecting a centre-ground, liberal proposition – I gave up quite a successful business to become an MP, driven by that – the selection process for most Tory associations did include a lean into a Eurosceptic position. So, looking back at that, and looking back at those positions and at what the membership of the Conservative Party was wanting, it wasn't a surprise that that issue became increasingly dominant. What was a bit of a surprise was that, if you take selections, it wasn't necessarily about saying you wanted to get out of Europe.

You obviously then had all of the stuff around the renegotiation. I think I saw there some precursors to the difficulty that Theresa May had in the negotiation of her withdrawal agreement – backbenchers were wanting Cameron to do more. He said they couldn't do more. And, it turned out potentially the EU could have or EU should have moved earlier, and/or he could have done so.

That was there, and on the backbenches there were about 70 Tory rebels. You had people like Steve Baker setting up groups. So, I think it was becoming more of an issue, but I think analysing that period around the renegotiation, what could have been done more then, whether there should have been more push to get more at that time, and then the aftermath in terms of the framing of the questions and the fact we'd put two choices on the table and didn't have the answer to one of them.

UKICE: David Cameron has subsequently said that a referendum was inevitable. It was only a question of when. Would you agree with that?

JS: I think certainly if I take you back to what I said about the selection – where somebody like me had benefited from a business point of view from the EU and felt very strongly we should be part of it, but was having to lean into a sort of scepticism about it – I don't think in 2010 it was the case that that needed to happen.

I think, as that Parliament progressed, probably you saw an acceleration. You saw UKIP, you saw it becoming more black and white, but I'm not sure it was inevitable. I mean, what would have happened if that renegotiation had been more material? What would have happened if the emergency brake and all of these other things that were debated at that time had been more material? Should the EU have moved harder or more cannily at that stage? I don't think Cameron wanted a referendum. I think that was discussed. (George) Osborne didn't want a referendum. I'm not sure it was inevitable.

UKICE: I'm quite intrigued as to whether the Whips' Office, where you were from 2015, had any sort of input into the content of the renegotiations. Was the Cameron leadership taking any notice of the views of the backbenchers when it was doing the renegotiation, or was it a very central Government project and not much input?

JS: To be honest, I was a junior member of that Whips' Office at the time. We saw Steve Baker and the creation of his group Conservatives for Britain. That campaigning group was beginning to become quite an irritant to the Whips' Office.

Again, what's interesting there is looking at how could that revised negotiation have been done better by Cameron. What more could be done earlier from a parliamentary management perspective on the immediate constitutional issues to try to temper them?

But I think we did. We did try to come to agreements and placate, but what was starting then was the stronger Eurosceptics were beginning to exert themselves, and you could begin to see the foundations of a desire to deliver Brexit over party unity. So, already the feelings I had later as Chief Whip of, 'Why the hell can't we come to some compromise? Why can't we get an agreement? Why don't we just work out some middle ground?' I think were evident then and, despite what they were saying, that group had a plan.

I think when you look back, I think there has been completely insufficient work done by all of us around why Vote Leave has been so successful. That group was just much more focused, not playing by quite the same rules of keeping the party together, respecting the fact things had been agreed at an election. I think it was just much more ruthless.

UKICE: When David Cameron came back with his package on renegotiation and suspended collective responsibility to allow five Cabinet ministers to campaign for Leave, did you think that was the right approach to party discipline?

JS: I think it's difficult when, on such a key issue, you don't have everybody singing from the same hymn sheet. I think your question comes back to, in terms of tactics, should we have brought things to a head earlier? Would that have had different results? I'm not sure, but certainly that exacerbated splits within the party.

We were, I guess, getting to a point where the Conservative Party itself was faced with a deeper split. So, you could understand why he was doing it, but I think it definitely had an impact in terms of still not getting everybody around

the renegotiation. There was a disappointment with that deal that would have probably been difficult for him to ever get over.

UKICE: Do you think David Cameron did overpromise in terms of what he could get out of Brussels?

JS: Yes, look, that whole exercise around the communication of Britain's relationship with the EU was difficult – whether it was in our association selections where I didn't go into detail on the merits of being in the EU, my experience as a business owner leaning into concerns about the EU, or Cameron exaggerating the deal he could come back with and then struggling to do so? I think my sense was that he and the Government were quite rapidly realising that they had – we had – a Conservative Party issue that we hadn't sold the merits or sold the realities strongly enough.

I think there's an interesting piece of work to be done around both that deal and the May deal on how much politicians should have been involved with those. I feel very strongly we should have spent much more time and money on informal engagement with the EU member states, and the EU Commission and the negotiating team on the May deal. Could that have happened in the other deal, as well? You were switching it from what seems to be quite common with the EU, which is a technocratic negotiation. More groundwork in that area could have given more space for political solutions.

UKICE: Were you concerned at the time that it would be very hard to bring the Conservative Party back together post-referendum?

JS: Yes, I think it was definitely clear at that stage that there were major challenges, but I think, before the referendum, there was still expectation from almost every side that it would be alright on the night.

UKICE: Did that mean, during the referendum campaign, that you felt David Cameron was fighting with one hand tied behind his back and allowed Johnson and Gove, to get away with things that probably they shouldn't have been allowed to get away with?

JS: Possibly, but I think also what is even more clear now is that there wasn't really a coherent articulation of what a centre-ground proposition on remaining

should be. What were the reasons? It was 'Project Fear'. It was negatives.

I think, yes, Cameron was obviously aware of those handling issues, and that would – and did – play into it. If you looked at the structure of the campaign, you had Conservatives for Britain. You then had the Conservatives In campaign that was being run on the Embankment somewhere, between the parties. Yes, you had major handling issues, but you had major organisational issues as was seen even as late as last year, as the Remain or 'soft Brexit' parties failed to stop an election. This theme carries through.

Nobody could articulate. Nobody had organised. Nobody had got enough fire in the belly to compete with a much more focused campaign.

The First May Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When we get to post-referendum, you played a role in organising support for Theresa May among Conservative MPs. At the time, what did you see as her advantages over her rivals?

Julian Smith (JS): She'd done a very good job as Home Secretary. I think she was clearly well known. She understood, I think, all the broader issues for Britain and, I felt, was a safe pair of hands and a strong leader.

I think, when you looked at the competition at that time, she did stand out. She was performing very well as Home Secretary. I suppose personally I also thought at that time it was less necessary – and I think most people had thought it was less necessary – to have somebody who'd won the referendum. I mean there was a desire for a good leader.

UKICE: You said, 'At the time,' I wondered whether in retrospect you felt that actually Theresa May started off at a disadvantage in exploring all the options because she had supported Remain?

JS: I think that perhaps, yes, as a result she leant into a harder approach. Some of that lean in, I think, did cause issues in the future. Certainly, the immigration speech at party conference and some of the rhetoric whilst reflecting some voter views were tougher than I and other centre ground Conservatives would have liked.

On the other hand, I wasn't right at the centre there at that stage. Clearly there was UKIP and that side of things that was having to be dealt with electorally. You can also go back again and look at the theme that we didn't prepare for either the outcome of the referendum question. Despite leaning in heavily at the start to the Leave vote she did work hard to make the case for a frictionless, more hybrid approach. The tragedy was that she, we didn't win that argument nor were there enough people making it.

Theresa led the effort, but even then, we didn't update people on what Brexit would mean in reality or have the confidence to do it. I think there's a catastrophic failure of confidence of all of us involved in articulating that centre-ground position and that frictionless position.

UKICE: What did you make of the handling of Parliament in the run-up to the triggering of Article 50? We had that big contest going to Supreme Court over doing it through prerogative powers rather than getting parliamentary consent. When it was brought back, we had a few minor skirmishes over Parliament's role, but no concession, a very big majority. Did you think the Government was right to try and keep this decision away from Parliament in that way?

JS: I think at the time, as an eager whip, we were quite involved. We obviously were focused on trying to deliver that vote, but you obviously had Gina Miller and you had all of work that you've described going on. But I guess, if you look back on it, if you'd taken those early months of Theresa May's premiership, could she have slowed that down a bit and had a slower-time discussion before the triggering? Perhaps, yes.

I can't remember at what point Oliver Letwin's team was brought in. I think it might have been after the election. I guess I'm quite interested in that as the period where I actually became more central was actually about mitigating the results of what, maybe, could have been addressed earlier. Could there have been more cross-party work at that time? Could there have been more work to look at the arguments to set up realities for different industries? But we obviously instead leant into the harder Brexit approach.

UKICE: Would that approach have been possible, given the assertiveness of the Brexit wing of the parliamentary party?

JS: I think that's right. The handling issue was not only external but internal. I suppose you had a light version, with Nick Timothy, of what then was to come with Dominic Cummings with the idea that you can't be half in and half out. But I think the parliamentary dynamics were, yes, as you say, already fairly clear. She was continuing to have to – continually having to – prove that she was one of them.

UKICE: Was it a surprise to you, sitting in the Whips' Office, to be tipped into the 2017 election campaign?

JS: Yes, it was a bit. I had nothing to do with that decision. I remember being told about it that morning by the Chief Whip. Yes, it was a surprise.

UKICE: Theresa May's approximate reason for it was that it would be difficult to get a deal through Parliament. She needed to get a majority to make the passage easier. Did you, in the Whips' Office, recognise, think that was a good argument when she put that forward?

JS: I think there were definitely issues in terms of having a small majority. Was it 15 at the time, 17, whatever? You could see why there was a case for trying to get a bigger one, but in retrospect it looks heavenly to have those numbers.

UKICE: Did you think, following the election, that the Prime Minister would change course on Brexit?

JS: I think at that time the initial challenge was trying to ensure we had enough support for a Government. That weekend, obviously, the DUP deal was done, but I remember just this frantic sense of trying to work through how we would keep the votes together.

I guess what becomes apparent through that is it's going to become quite difficult to be too flexible from the existing European position, because you're going to rely so much on all aspects of the Conservative Party, including the right. But I think at that immediate stage the main driver – certainly for us in the Whips' Office – was Corbyn and the need to keep him out.

UKICE: Did you think about whether you really needed a formal agreement with the DUP, because they were hardly likely to vote to put Jeremy Corbyn

into office?

JS: Yes. Gavin Williamson was managing – managed – all of that, along with Number 10. So, I wasn't involved with that detail, though obviously I ended up managing that relationship. But I'm not sure. It was a halfway house, wasn't it? I'm not sure whether the results would have been different had we had a more formal agreement with them or had we had nothing at all.

UKICE: Obviously, in hindsight, the implications of doing the deal with the DUP on the Brexit negotiations are clear. But do you think that knock-on effect – that it would make it even more difficult, perhaps, to do a deal than would otherwise have been the case – was understood at the time?

JS: Yes, definitely, I do think the confidence and supply agreement had a number of unintended consequences. My priorities as Chief Whip in managing that relationship would have been quite different from my priorities as Northern Ireland Secretary, in terms of the impact. Just on my answer on the deal with the DUP, I think it was crucial we had that deal and we tied them down a bit. When I say, 'I'm not sure what difference it would have made,' I think it did make a difference to holding the Government together.

In terms of Brexit, obviously we weren't able to close them on three votes. They had really, I think, very big opportunities and offers. Also, the party took a decision to go one way when they could have quite easily gone the other way in terms of their Brexit view. That was despite the fact that we had an agreement with them. It probably showed that just going for confidence and supply, rather than a formal coalition agreement, for them was the right decision.

Chief Whip

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we come on to your time as you were catapulted into being Chief Whip, and then you face probably the most tense parliamentary session in living memory. I just wondered if you might want to talk through the early stages. When did you first get inklings that this was going to be a very rough ride for multiple parts of the party, not just from the European Research Group but the group around Dominic Grieve, and that you were basically having to juggle a very divided party?

Julian Smith (JS): Yes. I can't remember at what point it became clear this was going to be as intense as it was, but as soon as I became Chief Whip we had all the 'Sexminster' scandals and all of that. Then it really took off quite quickly after that. One of the big skirmishes was the meaningful vote and Dominic (Grieve). I know Number 10 had an idea that you could stick an election as a threat during that negotiation with Dominic, but then the parliamentary party went mad when it heard the possibility.

I know there are questions of could we have got away with less or more on the meaningful vote? But negotiating all of that and negotiating between the different groups in the Conservative Party to get this bill (the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill) through was quite tough. I felt strongly, having voted to stay, that we did need to respect this result and we needed to deliver this. It was frustrating then that there wasn't a huge sex appeal around compromise. We'd got these groups that were fairly dug in, even at that stage.

UKICE: So, you finally got the European Union (Withdrawal) Act onto the statute book. You've then got this big programme of Brexit legislation you're trying to get through and then starts getting very stalled.

JS: Yes, it was pretty full on. We then had the first Executive Formation Act. I think those two acts, the first Executive Formation Act and the second, are fascinating. An awful lot was tacked onto those. But I guess what we were trying to do at that stage was ensure that we didn't fetter the negotiation too much, that Government was able – the Executive was able – to move forward with its deal. But it was pretty bumpy.

Then, obviously, when you got into the run-up to the first meaningful vote, the fact that there seemed to be no wriggle room on the EU negotiation, and then we had to go for it, and then we had to pull back from it. Then the second and third, which were fairly traumatic for the party.

Obviously the EU negotiation where, quite early on, it was clear that this wasn't going to be enough but it seemed we weren't going to get any more was probably the most tense period for me. You had a client base that were very clear, but I had a Prime Minister and a negotiating team that were saying they couldn't do much more.

UKICE: Do you think, had it been handled differently, Chequers ever had a chance of getting through Parliament?

JS: I think the handling of David Davis could have been better. I think it was not tenable. There were two negotiation tranches going on, and you had somebody in David and then somebody in Olly, and that was not synched. That had gone on for quite some time,

There was a dinner the night of the Chequers deal. I don't think it was that straightforward with Chequers, but that night all of the Cabinet were round the table. All of them did speeches to more or less support it. But then, clearly, they got contacted. They got lobbied to pull back. But I remember walking around Chequers with David Davis and he was still contemplating whether he could stay or not.

If he'd been able to stay – I think, by the weekend I saw him in Number 9 on the Sunday, he'd decided to go, but if he'd been able to stay – then that would have kept the then Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, on board, and it could have been quite different.

I don't think it was inevitable that it was doomed. I think, to be fair to those two individuals, they were probably trying to manage a number of constituencies in terms of their support. I think now, today, as we look for tariff free, friction free – or as frictionless as possible – we're going back to the realities of that team not being able to lead it through.

Also, even if they had led it through, and Johnson and Davis had stayed, would we have got it through Parliament? That was definitely not clear cut. It was a pretty difficult situation for anybody who had a high profile in this area. I'd be making the argument for them to lead towards a consensus, but the reality was that was quite difficult, given the way the Tory Party had broken up over this.

UKICE: Why do you think Johnson would have stayed, had Davis stayed?

JS: I don't know if he definitely would have stayed. Whilst I was frustrated – hugely frustrated – because I just was thinking, 'Look, guys, we need to have an agreement and we need to just move forward with it. This makes sense,' and, from their point of view, they had lots of people nipping at their heels, but I

think, by David going, that obviously allowed Boris to go. It would have been, I think, more difficult for him to go without David going. Not saying it wouldn't have happened.

UKICE: Was it the right decision to pull the first meaningful vote?

JS: It certainly made my Christmas marginally more bearable, but then I just started chasing around after Labour MPs desperately over the Christmas period. So, I think it probably was. I'm sure there are probably arguments both ways.

I think what happened was that the deal was agreed by Cabinet. There were concerns about the deal, but the deal was presented as a deal. There wasn't much more to be done. Then, in the run up to the meaningful vote, I'd spent hours trying to get the party lined up. It was evident that we couldn't do it, so then I was asking for the stuff that we needed: exit mechanisms, time limits, etc.

From late summer, October, it was me, as Chief Whip, trying to push to get more. But as the Cabinet said it had consented prior to that, that there wasn't much more that could be given. I do think we needed to somehow have persuaded the EU that we did need more. We did get some bits more, but it just wasn't enough.

UKICE: Do you think you managed to spell out enough for the DUP that, basically, the Theresa May deal might be the best sort of Brexit on offer for Northern Ireland?

JS: There was a lot of work done with the DUP between Government and them and quite a lot of, I think, good stuff as a result. I mean, there was the UK-wide customs union. There was quite a lot of the work around unfettered access and all of it. A lot of work had been done or was on offer.

I mean the feedback they were getting from businesses was clear. There were various business groups that had sprung up to try to defend the May backstop in NI. I think they were fairly clear that business and farming had major concerns.

By the way, they were certainly not happy when the Government allegedly cooked up support in NI for the backstop. The DUP, once they've taken a position, are very able to hold on it. So I don't think they would complain that there hadn't been clarity, either from businesses or from Government, that this was a good deal. It's just they had decided that constitutionally this was a threat that they could be locked never-ending in the backstop.

I think, as we saw as things develop, we were very close to getting them. I think we would have got them if John Bercow hadn't made his decision on the third meaningful vote. After the second meaningful vote, I think we had them lined up. The whole strategy was then that would bring the right wing of the Tory Party and more Labour MPs.

The problem was that, as we got towards those latter days and weeks of the meaningful vote process, the position of the ERG and the DUP was diverging. Initially they had thought they had solid bedfellows in the ERG in terms of support for the union. What became more apparent was that Brexit was more important than the union for that group of people.

UKICE: You've mentioned Labour MPs a few times. I just wondered, in retrospect, do you think there's anything that Theresa May could have offered them to get them to vote in favour?

JS: I think you have to believe that, as the deal was the result of a referendum which the Labour Party had supported you have to believe that that was always possible. I think one of the failures was that, whilst I felt very strongly people needed to come together to compromise and unblock this, that wasn't happening across a range of levels – including the Labour Party.

When we went to the Opposition talks, I remember very vividly a pitch that I had made to the Labour leadership that this could mean electoral disaster for them. It was in their interest to basically resolve this. There were groups of MPs – Caroline Flint, John Mann, people like Melanie Onn – a decent number of people who, if it had looked as if we could have got a meaningful vote through, would have made the jump. I do believe that, it definitely wasn't black and white, but remember we had very little wiggle room.

I think when it comes to the Opposition talks, if you look at what was actually

offered there, then if they had wanted to resolve this I think they could have. There were going to be votes – parliamentary votes on customs. Even, potentially, a parliamentary vote on the second referendum. But they didn't think they had enough support for second referendum, so they were holding out for more, but by that stage they were just determined not to give consent to it as a party. That, I would argue, had a massive impact – a massive impact for them electorally. That lack of compromise also ended up having a big impact on the DUP.

UKICE: Just before we got onto the Opposition talks, we had this process of Parliament trying to take control of the order paper at various points, facilitated by the Speaker. You're sitting watching these processes – the indicative votes, the Caroline Spelman amendment on no deal, and the Government then having to vote down the amended motion but some of your Cabinet colleagues abstaining or voting. What were you thinking as Chief Whip?

JS: I think I was despairing because what it was demonstrating was that the lack of compromise was leading to more entrenched positions. As you say with the Spelman amendment, you've got some Cabinet ministers wanting to do one thing; other Cabinet ministers wanting to do the other.

I never believed indicative votes were going to solve the issue. I was quite clear with Downing Street about my view. I think there was just no way that you were either going to get totally honest responses or that that was ever going to work. But you're right, on the amending: there was a strong anti no deal view, and that hardened. Many more Tory MPs got on board with the prospect of no deal as frustration accelerated.

I think my biggest takeaway from this is, if you've got any sort of problem, I think – politically at least, and probably more generally in life – try and sort it out as soon as you can, because a year and a half in, with everybody knackered, frayed nerves, people dug in into different positions, people resigning – positions where previously they wouldn't have dreamt of it – it was becoming fairly out of control.

UKICE: The other thing that characterised a bit of that period was these big tussles with Parliament over publishing information. I know we'd had the run-in on the analyses of the impact of Brexit. Then we had the stuff on the Attorney

General's advice, and Parliament using this humble address route. Did you think Government was handling Parliament right in making everything into a bit of a war with Parliament?

JS: I think if you take the Attorney's advice, there was a strong case that this was against protocol and all of that, and I could totally see why there was a very strong argument not to do it. I thought it was going to happen anyway, so I think my view was, 'Just get it out.'

I think it was difficult with some of these Humble Addresses because it was really threatening the very nature of civil service advice, and private advice, and all of that. I think the use of this was just showing how far trust had broken down. There was also the speech that the Prime Minister made attacking MPs, which I was very unhappy about.

UKICE: Did you ever believe, in the Whips' Office, that there might be a majority for anything with the indicative votes?

JS: I think I struggled to think that there would be. Even if there was, how would that have stopped different caucuses, different rebel groups from then changing their mind when it came to ratification or an actual vote? I just think this was a means that was doomed. The indicative votes process was doomed from the start.

UKICE: Did you ever think that the Prime Minister might lose the confidence vote in her own party of the previous December?

JS: I think it was difficult. I ran that leadership campaign. I ran that and we organised pretty well for that. I didn't think we were going to lose it, but it was always going to be difficult.

UKICE: I was just going to ask about being Chief Whip when you could see people like the ERG running their own whipping operation. It must have been quite bizarre to have a party within a party.

JS: It was dreadful, yes. I remember there were several weekends where there were all sorts of people resigning. That Government had more reshuffles than any other Government in history. But yes, it was pretty depressing.

I talked to you about the fact that you saw the origins of that in the earlier part of the decade. Whilst as Chief Whip and a middle-of-the-road politician who believes strongly in compromise and in the fact that friction is a real problem in our relationship with the EU in terms of trade, I definitely think you have to, in political campaigning terms or political ruthlessness terms, look at things like the ERG and how it organised and learn from it. I believe that they could have got most of what they wanted – and also, maybe, mitigated what could be future criticism if some of what they've said is proved to be wrong – by leaning into compromise. I didn't think it meant you couldn't have Brexit. I didn't think it meant you couldn't have honoured the referendum, but it was about an effective campaign.

UKICE: Was the sort of thing that Boris Johnson did over the rebellion in September – just taking the whip away – was that never contemplatable, because of the weakness of Mrs May's position in the party and the lack of majority?

JS: I think, obviously, we had the *Mail on Sunday* article with David Gauke, and Greg (Clark) and others. I think Amber (Rudd).

I managed the aftermath of that, where we were trying to get some resignations without it exploding the whole Tory Party. There were certainly huge demands for Cabinet ministers to be sacked, or for people to lose the whip as things progressed and as you had members of the Cabinet abstaining or rebelling.

My views are probably clear about the whip being removed last year in that I didn't think that was sensible, but I can see that there were arguments for being more muscular. But I think at the time you were trying to hold a party together. It got extremely messy, but we did still ensure that Jeremy Corbyn didn't get into power. What would have the consequences been of Jeremy Corbyn guessing into power?

I think the Tory Party making sure it didn't totally fall over at that time, you can talk about the fact we didn't compromise on Brexit. You can talk about the fact we didn't get the meaningful votes through, etc. Could we have done more with Europe? Could Europe have done more with us? There's all of that, for which I think there were lots of arguments one way and t'other, but I think we

also ensured that Corbyn didn't get near the levers of power. I believe that was a good thing.

UKICE: Can I just ask, as Chief Whip, given the Fixed-term Parliament Act, are you in some ways without sanctions, really, by that point? There's nothing, really, you can threaten people with.

JS: Yes, I think that's fair. Obviously, people rely on the Conservative Party, or whichever party is in power, for campaign support, and finances from the broader party, and patronage, and promises of not being difficult about a future seat – a future election. But yes, we'd used all of the tricks in the book, and the efficacy had run out.

I think Labour, when we look at Labour last year, there were definitely a reasonable number of their MPs wobbling, but what happened there was in, I think, the third meaningful vote, huge threats that the Chief Whip needs to sign the nomination papers. They used that ruthlessly, yes.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You took on the role of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We were told that one of the conditions of people joining the Cabinet was that they were prepared to contemplate no deal. I wondered how worried you were by the prospect of a no deal Brexit when you took over as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Julian Smith (JS): Yes, I'd been concerned. I never thought no deal was a good idea. I was pleased not to be asked directly whether I thought it was or not. I felt strongly that my role was to try and ensure that, as I tried to do in the Whip's Office, to make sure we got to a good solution and did my best again to try to make the case for some form of agreement.

UKICE: But when you looked at the state of planning for no deal when we had the 'Operation Yellowhammer' paper leaked to the Sunday Times and then finally published, it made pretty clear that the Government didn't really have a very good plan for managing no deal in Northern Ireland. When you actually got there, did you get more concerned about what it would mean?

JS: Yes, I was hugely concerned about no deal. Obviously, you have the security component of your work as Northern Ireland Secretary. Whilst I don't think we're going to return to 'The Troubles', it is still the most insecure part of the United Kingdom.

I think the biggest issue, really, was that there was no Government in Northern Ireland. Also, with prorogation, there was no appetite to have direct rule. I didn't think direct rule was a good idea, but there was no appetite to have it. I feared there was the possibility of going into no deal with no political decision-making, which I didn't think was tenable for a mature democracy or a mature and responsible Government.

UKICE: Can you speak to the reports that it was the security implications for Northern Ireland that ultimately persuaded the Prime Minister that he needed to get a deal?

JS: I can't speak for him. I think that – and I don't really want to go into what meetings he may have had or not, but I think, for everyone, ultimately you would have to look at that carefully. I think there was quite a continued debate that had been taking place in Theresa's time about, 'If you had your technology away from the border, would that make any difference?' No, it wouldn't, because these cameras are still and technology is still going to be problematic.

I had done a Chatham House Rules speech to the Irish Association at the end of September or early October, where I made the case: if we stuck with the withdrawal agreement, would we look for a consent mechanism? Because the issues that had been there as Chief Whip for me still remained, we needed some way of showing we weren't going to be caught in the backstop.

That went down quite well. I then pitched the idea, pitched the need for a deal to the Prime Minister. He was obviously getting other people doing the same. I suspect he ideally wanted a deal but was prepared to go further to show that he could live with the alternatives.

UKICE: Was that a consent mechanism on the May deal, with an all-UK backstop? Or was that the idea of going back to the EU's idea of a Northern Ireland-only backstop and attaching the consent mechanism to that as a more

feasible route?

JS: I think it was basically making the case that you should stick with the withdrawal agreement and do everything you can to get a consent mechanism to deal with the need to have an exit arrangement. To answer your question, it didn't go into the detail of then, 'Was it the original, or not?' It was trying to push for the deal.

It was the weekend that Amber resigned. Even though I was spending all my weekend trying to develop Irish relations and trying to do everything I could on that front, I didn't return the call quickly enough. So, apparently, there was some discussion in Downing Street that should I be sacked, even though I'd shown no indication I wanted to leave.

UKICE: Were you surprised that the Prime Minister ultimately went for the sort of deal he went to – that is to say, with a Northern Ireland-only backstop – given his stated position from a year earlier at the DUP conference?

JS: I think I wasn't surprised that we eventually got to a deal. It was touch and go. I think I was very worried we were not going to get there, but ultimately I wasn't surprised – too surprised – when we got there.

Then I think, just in terms of the nature of the deal, whatever my views, that probably wasn't a surprise either. My priority was to ensure we got no hard border on the island of Ireland. Honestly, I felt I'd achieved my goal in terms of delivering that, but I think that the issue on the all-UK versus NI backstop, inevitably there was going to be pressure from part of the Conservative Party on him to do that. So, it wasn't a huge surprise that that happened.

UKICE: Were you surprised about how willing the Conservative Party was, as the Unionist Party, to acquiesce in a border in the Irish Sea?

JS: I think that things had got to a stage where any deal was going to, by that stage, probably be looked upon quite favourably.

UKICE: You said you had suggested a consent mechanism. One of the criticisms of the consent mechanism on Northern Ireland is that it means that every four years there's a, sort of, proxy 'Do we stay close to the Republic, or

do we stay close to the rest of Great Britain?’ question, and the Assembly has to look at that. Were you concerned that that might have a destabilising effect on Northern Ireland? Or do you think it’s a useful mechanism to make sure that the disciplines aren’t so onerous that Northern Ireland votes to prefer a hard border?

JS: I think it definitely is an issue, in that you don’t want that to be an electoral issue every Assembly election. But I also hope that the opportunity of this – the huge opportunity for Northern Ireland of facing both ways, that some may argue would have been there even more with the May deal but is still there in this deal – that that can be emphasised.

I do think that you’re seeing already a desire from the DUP not to talk too much about Brexit. I hope that work can be done to demonstrate the fact that upending this would not be a sensible thing to do.

UKICE: During this period, on the sort of deal that the Prime Minister did, you were quite frank in some of the evidence you gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that this did involve checks between – potentially between – Northern Ireland and GB, and GB to Northern Ireland.

At the time, the Prime Minister was giving assurances in the House that it didn’t, so how frustrated were you that people weren’t being totally upfront about what the deal entailed?

JS: I’m not sure exactly I said that at the committee, but certainly there were implementation questions on how would it be implemented. Much of my time then was working with the PUL (protestant unionist loyalist) community in Northern Ireland, who were extremely concerned about the deal. So, I was really focusing on trying to make sure that they knew that the British Government was going to do everything it could to mitigate any processing in the Irish Sea, because they took a very hard line on the fact this was a constitutional threat. I think that they now seem to be in a better place, but it will obviously depend how the final implementation of the protocol goes.

UKICE: How did this all interact with the other great thing you were embarked on during this time, which was restoring power-sharing in Northern Ireland? You were talking about the absence of a Government when you were trying to

do that. How did the Brexit negotiations, and then the election, interact with that?

JS: I think it was apparent that no deal was going to be extremely difficult because it was clear we weren't going to get a direct rule bill through, and because I didn't think that would be the preferred option anyway. So, I was motoring quite hard to get talks going from last July and making the case that that was in Northern Ireland's best interests.

But it was really only after the first nurses' strike in a hundred years across the UK. It was in Northern Ireland, but it was the first UK nurses' strike, and waiting lists of 300,000-plus for health operations in Northern Ireland. Then the general election, where we obviously had this shake-out and many of the things predicted about not coming to a deal on Brexit coming to pass for the Labour Party, and then the DUP.

Then, obviously, we had politicians in Northern Ireland who were getting it on the doorstep, and it was possible to make another push. I had been clear that we would have an election – or call an election – soon after 13 January. I think that focused minds.

UKICE: What do you think the longer-term implications for Northern Ireland will be of the protocol? A lot of people speculating about the impact, both of the consent mechanism and of the checks between NI and GB, and their longer-term political implications. What do you think it means for the future of the province?

JS: Even though I would argue this is not a constitutional change, I think that any change to Northern Ireland has always got to be treated very carefully. That was why I'd spent so much time with the unionist community after the Brexit deal was signed.

I think there's a huge opportunity for Northern Ireland to face both ways: to get inward investment from companies and growth from companies who see the advantages of its proximity to the EU, with access to the UK market as well. So, I think there's a huge opportunity, but I also worry that in how we all deal with nationalism or nationalist parties – nationalism in Scotland, in Northern Ireland particularly – we have to be quite careful about ensuring that we show

there's respect there, and in the same way as we do to the unionist community. But I think it's clearly going to be significant change. Change means taking care, but I think there are opportunities there, as well.

UKICE: I wondered whether, looking back over the whole sweep of the Brexit process as well as that phase as Northern Ireland Secretary, you have a view about what this says about the way in which people take Northern Irish issues seriously. Does any of this make you think, 'Actually, we need to rethink the way in which we think about some of these constitutional issues in the way in which we do politics?'

JS: I think we have to just be extremely humble about how we deal with those citizens, whether they're nationalists in Scotland or Northern Ireland. I think how we handle and work with those citizens is really important, so I think tone is very important. I guess I think it is difficult in the way that some aspects of Brexit have had to be executed. There are some fairly big wounds, I think, where people probably feel that Brexit was prioritised over other issues.

I think trying to resolve that – and resolve that in as respectful a way with those people that maybe don't believe what I believe about the union – is quite important. Whether it's the relationships that got frayed with Dublin; whether it's the relationships across the EU and internationally; or whether it's those relationships with people who were very concerned about aspects of Brexit, particularly of no deal, and who got quite scared. I think there's just a fair amount of work to do.

I can also see the other argument that says, 'We went round in circles for years and we needed to be a bit more bullish to get this done.' I just think the context of this in Northern Ireland, where it was actually helping to underpin the Good Friday Agreement, or at least interacting with it, made it more difficult.

UKICE: Where has this left the UK's relationship with the Republic of Ireland? Clearly, you were a big protagonist in phase one of the talks on ensuring no hard border, and you worked very closely with Simon Coveney on the restoration of power-sharing. I just wondered whether you thought that that relationship was now in a good place or whether it introduced a lot of new tensions on a relationship that had improved quite markedly while the UK and the Republic of Ireland were both members of the European Union.

JS: Yes, I think during the negotiations last year and when I was Chief Whip relations between Ireland and the U.K. had got depressingly frayed. I worked hard as Northern Ireland Secretary to use the relationship between Northern Ireland and Ireland to re build the broader relationship. I used Hillsborough a lot and built relationships with Simon Coveney and others in the Taoiseach's office, while we were ostensibly discussing Stormont restoration. I think this along with other initiatives by some in number ten meant that by the Manchester summit things had really improved.

I think to be fair, the year or two before Ireland and the EU could have done more as well. My overall comment on this sort of area is that – whether it's Dublin, whether it's members of the EU, whoever – in terms of international ministers and people Britain needs to have relationships with, it is nowhere near where it needs to be. I mean, when was the last time Prime Ministers or ministers stayed an extra night in a European capital or in Dublin to just go and have a meal, go and have a beer, go and have some human interaction? It is happening, but it's not happening at the level it needs to. We saw the big impact of that, I would argue, when I did that in Northern Ireland, but we also saw the big impact when the Prime Minister did that.

I think I always thought there was an interesting journalist or parliamentary question about how much money has Britain spent on meals and wine during this EU negotiation? I suspect it was a few grand. How ridiculous is that? We should have been all out there and we should have been understanding what the issues were, explaining our issues, flying out to see (Jean-Claude) Juncker last Christmas when we needed an exit mechanism to the backstop.

This is about people. It's about charisma. It's about communication. I think that I would say there has been a fairly collective failure for the last few years on Britain's part – I'm not saying it doesn't happen – that we've really got to look at over the coming years.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Looking back more broadly on the politics of the last few years, do you think what has happened has marked a sea change in the way Parliament works? Do you think whipping, for instance, will ever be the same again after the experience of the last few years? Or do

you think that, actually, Parliament has got into the habit of behaving differently and will continue to do so?

Julian Smith (JS): No, I don't think it will. I think it will probably be dependent on the topic. This European topic was so big that it did give consent for, in a strange way, rebellion. I think it also depends on the size of majority. I don't think it is inevitable that stays the same, although obviously you've seen already the Huawei rebellion and others, even with a big majority.

But generally, if you take the first year of the Johnson period compared to the May period – certainly the bit after the election – Johnson has had much more stable parliamentary management. That's not to say that patterns have been put in place, but I don't think it should be anywhere near what it was before.

UKICE: Has the Tory party changed beyond all recognition, or is it still essentially the same party that has had a mad couple of years and can now settle down?

JS: I think that it definitely has changed, but I hope that it can settle into the things that drew me in to begin with: the middle-ground Conservatism as articulated by David Cameron – and, by the way, articulated by Boris Johnson as Mayor. But also, that, as custodians of business, ensuring business is successful, and free markets, and that we do ensure we're continuing to deliver that.

I think it has been a very, very difficult period. I think you could argue that we've delivered the referendum result, which is a big achievement, despite the difficulties. But I do hope that now it does return to a much more pragmatic approach to how we do our business.