

## Caroline Lucas

**MP, Brighton Pavilion** May 2010 –

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## The Europe debate before 2016

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** If we go back to those dim and distant days before the referendum – you supported a public vote because you said it would allow space for a debate about the future of the union. What was your reasoning around that?

**Caroline Lucas (CL):** Having been a member of the European Parliament for 10 years, I was acutely aware of people's lack of understanding about what the EU does, the lack of understanding about the fact that actually we do have democratic inputs into that institution, that the EU isn't just something that gets done to people. It's something that we actually have a say in, and yet so few people knew that. I don't blame them for that. I'm afraid I would put a lot of the responsibility for that at the door of the media. I used to spend so much time begging the media, including the BBC, to take seriously what was happening in the European Union, and the European Parliament in particular.

Just as a small example, there's the Westminster Hour on Radio 4 on Sunday night where they have a couple of MPs talking about the week ahead. I begged them, just maybe one time in four, could they have MEPs looking at the week

ahead? Could they have some sense that democratically elected representatives of this country were actually involved minutely in co-legislating in a very serious way in the European institutions? They just didn't, and so I felt so strongly that there was a sense that people felt that they'd never had a say in the development of the EU, that they felt it was something being done to them, they felt it was undemocratic.

Naively, and it does feel very naïve sitting here now in 2020 looking back to what I thought then, I genuinely thought that a referendum would be an opportunity to have those debates, to have a much more inclusive discussion about what the EU was for. To the extent that people thought it was about anything, it was about trade – and yes, it is about trade – but the values of the European Union, the role that the EU plays on environment or human rights or social standards, the role it could play as a bulwark to a more deregulated globalisation rather than being a key player in promoting that. All of that is not being discussed, was not being discussed, and so to me it felt like the referendum campaign would be the opportunity to have this proper debate, a full debate.

I do underline my naivety at this point. I genuinely did think that once people understood more about it and felt they had a say in it, there would be a greater appreciation of the EU and we would stay in on better terms. That was what I thought. I was wrong.

**UKICE:** Was part of your thinking that a referendum was inevitable, so you were putting yourself on the right side of history? Because of the state of the Conservative Party and the debate about Europe, did you think we were going to have to have a referendum at some point anyway regardless of its desirability?

**CL:** No, I don't think I thought that was inevitable. No, I was quite surprised actually when it was suddenly announced. Again, there is a benefit of hindsight here, but it felt like there was so little preparation for it. As we have since discovered from understanding processes of other countries that have referendums more frequently than we do, you don't normally just bounce a country into a referendum after a very short campaign. I thought that there would be much greater preparation for it and a mass information campaign beforehand.

I didn't think it was inevitable. I just felt that for over 10 years of being an MEP I had said repeatedly that people need a say in this institution. They have to feel as if they have a stake in it. They have to be asked about it. They cannot just have it imposed upon them. So, when a referendum was on the cards, it would have felt irrational at that point to oppose it having asked for something similar. Although I didn't use the word 'referendum', I was certainly saying there needed to be a process of engagement and education and understanding, and listening. What do people want out of this institution?

**UKICE:** Did you think that the argument on free movement was winnable given the role that immigration ended up playing, with the Greens as the party perhaps that was most positive about free movement as opposed to seeing it as a burden?

**CL:** I certainly saw that as the biggest challenge in terms of making the case. Philosophically, I absolutely believe in the importance of it, the principle of it, and so does my party. I do recognise that after 2004 and so forth it was a harder argument to make. I suppose, again, it comes back to whether I thought it would have been possible to have a serious debate about it. The fact is that we did have emergency handbrakes to use should we have wished to do so if there was a particular point where the country was being in some way threatened by too much immigration. I think one of the frustrations was that some of the tools that the government pretended it didn't have it did have, and other countries occasionally used them.

To that extent, again, before all of the referendum campaign unfolded, standing on the cusp of that if you like, I guess I still hoped that it would be possible to have a rational debate about immigration. Again, I laugh now as I say that because clearly facts proved otherwise. But the fact is that when we did open up to Eastern Europe, that was our choice. It was not inflicted upon us by the EU. That was a choice of the Prime Minister at the time, rightly or wrongly, and the fact is that we did have tools which could have regulated the flow of immigration should we have wished to use them, and we didn't. Those arguments, to me, felt stronger than they turned out to be once the campaign started.

**UKICE:** Do you accept that there were a lot of contingent circumstances that made that argument even more difficult? There was the refusal of other

member states to open up, there was the Eurozone crisis that meant both that we had an economic crisis, and that more people came from Southern Europe here. The debate was very, very different.

**CL:** Completely. You're absolutely right, those factors did make it much more difficult. The fact that there were so many refugees coming from places like Syria that have got absolutely nothing to do with free movement, but it allowed (Nigel) Farage and others to whip up fear with their posters and rhetoric. People didn't make distinctions between where people were coming from, sadly. As far as those who were opposed to free movement were concerned, having posters with large numbers of Syrian refugees lined up at a border was a perfect gift to them because it made an argument, albeit one that wasn't based on fact.

## The referendum

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Jumping forward slightly into the referendum campaign – but was there anything you, or the Stronger In campaign could have done at that stage, or was it too late in some ways on the issue of immigration?

**Caroline Lucas (CL):** That comes back to so many issues of the Stronger In campaign, doesn't it, in terms of what the face of that campaign was, what the slogan was, the things it chose to factor in? If you were starting with a blank piece of paper and saying, 'Would it have been possible to construct a campaign that could have taken on that argument with much greater effectiveness and integrity than it did?' Then yes, for sure. I can't tell you if it would have been successful and I don't doubt the years of stereotypes that we were up against and that was always going to be hard. But frankly, the Stronger In campaign didn't even try on this issue. They didn't try.

**UKICE:** No, and their argument would have been that focus grouping it, polling they just couldn't come up with a counter-argument on immigration and therefore it was better to stress the economy. Did you ever argue against that?

**CL:** Absolutely. Many a meeting I argued against that. This gets us into other questions, but it just felt that the whole focus of the Remain campaign was on such a transactional economic basis that didn't touch people's deeper sense

of the values of Britain and so forth. It could have been perfectly possible to construct an argument. People like Alf Dubs have done so since, around the question of 'Who are we as Britons?' Well, we are people who are outward looking and generous hearted and compassionate and open and we stand up for human rights and values. We have exported those values around the world and we have a proud history of really making a difference.

You could have imagined it. I'm not saying that we would have won or that it would have been easy, but I think there was a point of integrity there that was just ignored and should not have been.

**UKICE:** It's arguable that the Leave campaign benefited, in a sense, from having two separate campaigns: an official Leave campaign, and Leave.EU that managed to appeal to a different segments of voters. I was wondering whether at any point there was any consideration given to whether there needed to be two Remain campaigns, one transactional and one possibly to mobilise some of the sentiments we've seen since in the People's Vote campaign in making a more positive case.

**CL:** Absolutely, and when we saw how transactional the official Remain campaign was, I would argue we tried to do exactly that. The setting up of Another Europe is Possible was precisely to try to get a different set of faces, to reach out to a different group of people with a different set of arguments and messages that the Stronger In campaign was simply not prepared to entertain.

Now, Another Europe is Possible was very small. It never had the resources it needed, but I think it was trying to do the right thing. It was trying to reach out to people who did care about the value-based arguments rather than only the narrow economic ones, and did make common links with the trade unions, with different kinds of groups in society and tapped into the argument about what the EU could be as well as what it was.

In a sense, it was trying to do two things. Partly, it was trying to say, 'Actually, the EU does a whole lot more positive things than you're hearing from the other side.' I think one of the difficulties was of course the EU was flawed. Of course it is. As we said, so is the British Government. That doesn't mean to say you walk away from it. You try to improve it. I do think that one of the challenges for us was to be defending an institution that in some respects – the

Common Agricultural Policy, for example – was pretty indefensible.

Nonetheless, at the same time saying, we were saying ‘But Another Europe is Possible.’ It was that sense that if the EU didn’t exist you’d have to create it because these are our closest neighbours and so many of the threats that we face, environmental, terrorism, human rights, are cross-boundary, that we need to have some sort of cross-national institution that brings people together to work on those things.

**UKICE:** Did you have any sympathy with another of the critiques of the EU as too distant and elite, and could you have done anything, you think, to counter those?

**CL:** Well, it was hard, and it has to be said that some of the statements from (Jean-Claude) Juncker in particular did not help in terms of reinforcing that idea. As an MEP, I was part of all of those campaigns to, for example, stop the travelling circus to Strasbourg, which is indefensible and does cost a huge amount of money and provides acres of possibilities for negative press, seeing all those juggernauts going down the motorways full of trunks of MEPs’ stuff. There are legitimate criticisms of the EU, and yes, too often it has felt too remote. Some of the things that it does, like the Strasbourg shift, although one can explain historically why we’ve ended it up there, nonetheless the optics are extremely damaging. It didn’t help our case, that’s for sure.

**UKICE:** How great was your involvement with the Remain campaign? Obviously you campaigned, but on an organisational level how deeply involved were you with Stronger in and their planning?

**CL:** Well, I was interested that they invited me on to their steering group, so I went to their steering group meetings and tried hard, as pretty much a lone voice, to be saying that the narrow economic focus was missing something and that our slogan, which I still struggle to remember – what was it? Those three verbs? I would say they didn’t cut through.

So I was there in name and I felt it was important to take that seat even though I didn’t feel as if I was having very much influence, or any influence really, over the decisions that were being taken. It was very male. You got the sense that quite a lot of decisions were being taken before they ever came into the



steering board meetings. They were absolutely obsessed by the polling they were getting, and I don't know enough about it to know whether it was flawed, but they were absolutely dead certain that the way they were doing it was the only way of winning.

I remember other people around the table. Dafydd Wigley from the Lords was there for Plaid Cymru too. I remember him talking about the number of billboards that were everywhere from the Leave campaign and asking, 'Could we not have more of a campaign on the ground?' It was just dismissed, that it had to be the air war, we didn't need a ground campaign in the same way. I think that was a real mistake as well.

**UKICE:** Were the Stronger In campaign confident they were going to win?

**CL:** My memory – and this is where things do get a bit hazy – but my memory would be that up until the last six weeks, I think they were, yes. Then there was a dawning realisation that actually some of these polls were turning out to be less positive than anticipated.

**UKICE:** You'd said publicly in January 2016 that you were worried that we were in danger of sleepwalking our way out. Why did you have this sense of foreboding when so many on the remain side didn't?

**CL:** I'm not sure there's much more that I could add, except that I think it did feel that we were in danger of reinforcing the elitism that was one of the legitimate critiques of the EU, in the sense that we were putting up Tony Blair, (Peter) Mandelson, white men, frankly, who didn't have that much traction anymore with the public in a positive way. There was no sense of diversity in our campaign. June Sarpong was brought in at some point. She never had much of a public role and so it felt like there was a bit of tokenism there. It felt that we weren't talking to real people. We were just thinking that our economic arguments were going to be what wins the day and so it didn't matter that much who the spokespeople were. It mattered in the sense that they wanted the biggest names, but they weren't thinking about the resonance of those people with the wider public.

**UKICE:** In that context, how important do you think Jeremy Corbyn's role or non-role in the campaign was?

**CL:** I think if we had had a Labour leader who had been pro-EU, who had been really willing to pull their weight, then it would have made all the difference. I think it would have made all the difference. I don't want to particularly criticise Jeremy personally, in the sense that he was being true to what he believed. He wasn't pro-EU, so it would be hard to make him into that. Certainly, it was a tragedy of history that at such an important point we didn't have someone as leader of the Labour Party who was passionately pro-EU or, not even passionately pro-EU, just pro-EU would have done. That would have mobilised the rest of the party. As we learnt more afterwards, it was clear just how riven the party was over it.

Alan Johnson apparently didn't have the resources that he needed to do his job as well as it should have been done. It felt like it was always going against the grain of where the rest of the Labour Party was. I do feel strongly that if Labour had been willing to play that role as an active and committed player they could have influenced it more, because one single Green MP isn't going to do it, but the whole of the Labour Party, if you had someone speaking for them, could certainly have concentrated minds. I think it could have made the world of difference.

**UKICE:** Did you notice a big shift in the nature of the campaign when the Conservatives came on board with it after the renegotiation? If it did, did it change things for the better or for the worse?

**CL:** My perception was that it made it harder. It felt even more than that the decisions were being taken elsewhere. It felt like any influence that I might have had, or indeed any of us on the steering group might have had, significantly reduced. It felt like they were going through the motions of having this slightly annoying steering group that they had to report to. Clearly, it gave the campaign a boost in a way. As I understand it, there was suddenly more money and profile, but it reinforced most of the messages that were part of the problem in the first place.

**UKICE:** There is an argument whether you sell it or not off the back of a deal actually starts you off on the wrong framing anyway because it makes it look as though EU membership is only to be judged by the immediacy of some techy details you've just negotiated. I wondered whether that resonated with you, that that actually set up the Remain campaign in a difficult way from the start



because it had opened up the door to leaving is a perfectly reasonable option.

**CL:** Yes. In retrospect I think you're right. It felt like, again, a very transactional, 'If we don't get what we want, then we're walking out,' rather than saying, 'There are 27 other member states and we need to be working together to come up with solutions that we can all live with.' It made it sound like it was more of a, 'Take it or leave it.'

**UKICE:** Yes. Did you ever feel that the Conservatives, David Cameron in particular, were fighting with one hand behind their back, in the sense that they didn't want to criticise their colleagues too virulently because they wanted to put the party back together again after the referendum, which they presumed they would win?

**CL:** Yes. I think that's right. The trouble was everybody was split. The Tories were split, Labour were split.

**UKICE:** Yes. You'd had experience in some ways in the referendum on the electoral system of a Prime Minister who really did go all out. Presumably it was quite different in that sense.

**CL:** Yes. completely. They were willing to pull out every kind of dirty trick against Nick Clegg and so forth during that campaign. You're right, not that I'm necessarily advocating that as a positive way forward, but it was certainly significant to see the difference.

**UKICE:** When you woke up on the morning of 24 June – assuming you'd gone to sleep – what was your expectation then? Did you just think, 'Okay, that's it, we're leaving,' or did you have a clear view in your mind as to what would happen then, what Brexit would look like, what the process might look like?

**CL:** Well, I remember waking up in shock because although I realised it was much tighter than we would have wanted, I think I still did expect that we would have won. When I put the radio on at 3:30 in the morning or something, or 4:00 in the morning, I was really shocked. I remember I had to be at the BBC at 5:30 or 6:00 to do an interview. I just remember sitting in that studio hearing all of the commentary coming in, feeling stunned. I remember it was a beautiful sunny morning. Afterwards I walked over Westminster Bridge and remember

seeing the boat, the commemoration for Jo Cox, which was just bobbing in the river below. I was with my staff team, and we recorded a short video just there on the bridge at that time, trying to find some hope.

I certainly wasn't anticipating that there would then be a People's Vote campaign or anything like that, but I did want to try to communicate to the people that I knew would be feeling as heartbroken as I was that we can't give up on close relations with our neighbours and that European values are things that we care deeply about and will continue to stand up for. I suppose my sense was just, 'Let's keep all options on the table,' but without thinking quite as clearly, 'Does that mean some kind of further process?'

## The People's Vote Campaign

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**UKICE:** When you were approached to be part of the launch of the People's Vote campaign what were your expectations of it? Did you think this was just an expression of principle rather than something that might actually get you anywhere? Did you impose any conditions on how they would go about campaigning when you joined, given your experience of the referendum campaign?

**CL:** I don't think I felt that I had that degree of leverage, rightly or wrongly, so I didn't impose any conditions. I felt that, given everything that we'd learnt about the way in which the referendum was conducted and, frankly, the lies that were told; and that at least a number of people were feeling buyer's remorse, saying that if they'd understood then what they knew now they wouldn't have voted that way; and, because it was such a narrow win for the Leave campaign as well really, it just felt right to double check it.

I think some of those analogies that we used were persuasive: before you take out a contract on a new boiler you often have a cooling off period so you can decide if you really do want it; even when you're buying something pretty insignificant, you have the small print of a contract that says you've got a certain period to just absolutely check this is what you want. That sense of thinking that if this decision is so momentous, and there are so many question marks about the way in which the referendum campaign was run, that it just felt absolutely the right and the proper thing to do was just to check with people. I felt that was a winnable position to take and an important position to take.

**UKICE:** Clearly you had concerns about the way that the 2016 referendum campaign was run. Did you have concerns about the way that the People's Vote campaign was run in terms of the personnel, for example, or the techniques it was using?

**CL:** I think they fell into some of exactly the same traps as the Stronger In campaign had, and clearly there were major disagreements and personal animosities that broke out in the most appalling way just at the most important time. I think they started off with better aspirations. I think they did understand about the importance of diversity and the role of the unions and having different faces for the campaign. Certainly the meetings that we had as stakeholders for the People's Vote campaign were far more inclusive and they included representatives from the ground campaign and community groups and the European Movement, for example, and, as I say, the unions. It did feel a much more diverse campaign and it felt that there was much more scope to have more than simply the economic transactional basis for the campaign.

I think one of the frustrations was that an awful lot was still being decided elsewhere and there were times when we just pulled our hair out. When we saw, frankly, Tony Blair being used as a spokesperson again, it was just like, 'What are you doing? Why is that helpful?' Some of the decision making wasn't as democratic as it should have been. I think the culture over at Millbank Tower, the perception at least from the outside I got was that it was a very macho, rather exclusive operation.

**UKICE:** Do you think that it should have had a more obvious leader or figurehead?

**CL:** Yes, I think that probably would have helped, or at least, in true Green Party fashion, you could have had co-leaders or something, but I think having some people that you could associate the campaign with would have helped. Yes, I think it would have made it more coherent and consistent.

**UKICE:** Was that ever discussed? Were you, for example, ever asked? Would you have done it if you were?

**CL:** I wasn't asked, and yes, I probably would have done it if I had been. Then I certainly would have come up with some conditions. If by doing that, by being

the figurehead, you actually also had some influence over the way that the campaign was being run, then for sure.

**UKICE:** Did the People's Vote ever have any idea how it would fight a referendum if it actually succeeded in getting one? It started off as just, 'Let's have another chance to think about it,' and then slightly morphed into a much more, obviously, 'This is a mistake. We need to reverse Brexit.'

**CL:** There was always a tension between whether or not this was an overtly pro-Remain body, or whether it was the much more open, 'We need to look at this again.' Yes, that tension was running beneath it all the time. Obviously the closer that we got towards the end, it became I think a much more pro-Remain position. I don't think it did spend nearly enough time thinking about how we would win a referendum were we to get one. I suppose in their, or our, defence we would maybe say that it was becoming so difficult to win the People's Vote campaign per se that you wouldn't want to divert too much resource into the second battle when you hadn't won the first – albeit that I take the very obvious point that if you haven't prepared for that, then you could get the worst of all worlds and have a people's vote that you then lose. Some people, people like Hugo Dixon and others, were certainly talking about this and asking 'Let's think about this, what will we do if we are to be successful?'

**UKICE:** Can I just probe your use of language, actually? You weren't sure whether to call it 'their' or 'our'. Is that because you felt semi-detached from it in some ways?

**CL:** There were the meetings that Chuka (Umunna) convened. That was another theme, how much was this being used as a vehicle for people's own party political ambitions. That was a deep frustration. Those meetings that Chuka convened did feel that that was an 'our'. They did feel genuinely inclusive, but then the conclusions of those meetings would go back into the Millbank office and what happened there did feel like 'them' not 'us'. There were some very large egos there and it felt harder to penetrate that.

**UKICE:** Just to build on that last point very slightly: did the whole thing get slightly messed up with attempts on the part of some people to undermine Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, so they were fighting two simultaneous battles?

**CL:** Absolutely, and it crystallised over the issue of the timing of the vote in Parliament about whether or not there should be a People's Vote. To some of us at least, I think it seemed as if those people who wanted to undermine Corbyn's leadership wanted that vote ASAP – even at the risk of losing it – so that they could demonstrate that Corbyn was not leading the Labour party in a positive way, and that would then help their own ambitions, whatever those were, within the party. That was a constant tension about when to put this vote. When we come to talk about what happened in Parliament, it will take a lot for me to forgive the Lib Dems for giving Boris (Johnson) what he wanted, because I still think we could have won the right to a People's Vote. I still think we could have won it in Parliament had they refused Boris his general election and left him dangling for longer.

We'd been keeping the line. Towards the end, we were having at least daily meetings in Parliament trying to keep all the different parties on the same page when it came to waiting for the right moment to have that vote and then as soon as the Lib Dems broke ranks and agreed to an election, they called Boris's bluff and he went for it. They said, 'Bring on a general election.' He said, 'Okay then,' and they handed him exactly what he wanted.

As soon as the Lib Dems had done it, the SNP followed suit, because obviously there were big reasons why they would want to go for an election at that point – as soon as you'd got them both going, then it was almost impossible for Labour to hold out and so the whole pack of cards collapsed. It was tragic.

**UKICE:** You hear two contradictory approaches to why the Lib Dems did what they did in supporting a general election. One was a loss of nerve, i.e., 'We can't hold this line in Parliament for long, it's going to end up with Brexit happening.' The other is overconfidence, which is, 'We can have an election and we can do really well because we did in the European elections.' Which of those was it, or was it a mixture of both?

**CL:** I think it's the latter. We could have held the line. We could have held the line. By this point there were meetings happening three or four times a day of the different players from the different parties and relations were good right up until the Lib Dems broke ranks.

**UKICE:** If we can just hit rewind a little bit and go back to the aftermath of the 2017 election in Parliament. After those results came in, did you think that actually Brexit was now stoppable in a way it wasn't beforehand?

**CL:** Yes, completely. Yes, it changed the game, the numbers did make it much more possible. Then we saw more defections – Anna Soubry, Sarah Wollaston, Sam Gyimah. No, it changed the game certainly.

**UKICE:** Did you ever think at this period about whether it was the right choice to be opposing any softer Brexit in order to have the possibility of stopping Brexit completely? Was there a debate about, 'Do we try and promote a Norway, close relationship versus going all out to stop it?'

**CL:** Yes, for sure there were those conversations and there were very legitimate concerns on both sides of the argument. I think most of us still felt that we had the opportunity to win a People's Vote and that a single-market option was still such a selling out of what our vision was and is of the EU. We made a calculation that if we held out, that we could still win a People's Vote. I genuinely still believe we could have done had the Lib Dems not precipitated that general election. We will never know, but that was my sense of it at the time and that's what drove the way I made choices.

**UKICE:** The other thing bubbling under at that time was this prospect of this Government of National Unity. Was that something you ever took seriously?

**CL:** I suppose there were a few weeks when we began to take it seriously. Some big meetings were held of all the opposition parties, hosted by Jeremy (Corbyn). It was always difficult because the Lib Dems wanted to make a change of Labour leadership as a condition of a GNU (Government of National Unity). That wasn't going to happen, so the idea of that didn't last very long, practically speaking. If they could have dropped that or if they could have compromised a bit or if they could have come up with some kind of process, I don't think it would have been an impossible scenario. For as long as it was just as uncompromising as, 'The condition for this is Jeremy goes,' then it's not surprising how it turned out.

**UKICE:** How far did you get in that process? Was there talk of who would serve or did it just not get that far?



**CL:** Not that I ever heard, no.

**UKICE:** In the referendum, would you have accepted a referendum where the choice was between no deal or Remain? Or did you think that was just too dangerous?

**CL:** I found that a really difficult one and I still find it a really difficult one. I think, on balance, I would find that too dangerous. You can imagine, we had endless discussions about that as well. There was talk, wasn't there, of a two-stage referendum .

**UKICE:** Was there a point where you think, in retrospect, you should have just said, 'Okay, this referendum thing isn't going to work. We need to just soften Brexit as much as possible and keep the relationship as close as possible?'

**CL:** Well, of course, with the benefit of hindsight you can say, 'Yes, that would have been a better strategy.' You can only make the decisions that you make with the knowledge you have at the time that you're making them. I still felt we had the numbers to have achieved the People's Vote. At the time I was making those decisions, with the information that I had when I made those decisions, I did what I believed was best.

**UKICE:** In your party, were there any tensions about taking a very strong and unequivocal position on a second referendum or was that quite a straightforward discussion?

**CL:** On the issue of the second referendum, there was very strong agreement. The irony was that of course the one person in the party who was most strongly against our position on Brexit itself was our other parliamentarian, which was just a bit of unfortunate choreography. Our member of the House of Lords supported Leave: all credit to her, she was taking a position that she'd taken all her life. There was perfect integrity to it, that's what she believed and that's what she stood up for. But it was unfortunate. It meant that the parliamentary party of two were split, whereas a party of 50,000 members or more really wasn't split.

There was a small group called Green Leaves that did some mobilisation, but the numbers were very small. Yes, just like all parties, there would be a

difference of views, but essentially, in all of our party leadership and the vast majority of our party would have been very, very positively pro-Remain.

**UKICE:** At the time you were critical of the Lib Dems proposing Revoke. Did you think that it would undermine your ability to collaborate with them in the run up to the 2019 general election?

**CL:** My bigger worry was that it tarred the whole of the People's Vote campaign with an intolerance and a positioning that was really unhelpful. Something we haven't talked about yet is the 'Dear Leavers' initiative that I started. Revoke felt like the polar opposite of what I felt we should be doing, which was listening to people who voted to Leave and seeking to understand what led them to that. There was a tone that ran through some people's pronouncements on our side that did sound as if anybody who voted Leave was just stupid and ignorant and didn't know what they were doing.

That was just so massively damaging, and that's what I was trying to counteract with the 'Dear Leavers' campaign, to say, 'Hang on a minute, there's plenty that we do agree on here,' and there are good reasons why people might well have thought voting Leave was the way to get the change that they urgently and rightly want to see. Yet the revoke position seemed to be such a slap in the face to that.

The reason that I spoke out so strongly against revoke was I felt it was completely undermining all of the work that I'd been doing on 'Dear Leavers' and others, trying to slightly change ... well, not even slightly change the tone, considerably change the tone of some of the pronouncements. It just felt insulting, I think.

**UKICE:** Could you understand the rationale for it from their point of view?

**CL:** Well, yes, I can understand the rationale. Yes. They misjudged their voters and thought that would be a way of being distinctive and hoovering up every single Remain vote in the country, which was a massive misjudgement.

**UKICE:** When it came to 'Dear Leavers', it was an anti-establishment message that, in a sense, separated the EU off and said, 'You have every right to have your grievances against the establishment here, but the EU isn't

part of this,' if I understand it – did that get traction?

**CL:** Let me just check if I agree with the premise of your question. I think 'Dear Leavers' was recognising that some people who cast their vote for Leave were indeed voting with great knowledge of the EU and a great opposition to it and that's a logical thing for them to do. But a large number of people voted no in that referendum for reasons that weren't specific to the EU at all. It was more because they desperately wanted things to change. There was a sense that things couldn't get any worse in terms of their situation in the country in terms of poverty, inequality, lack of hope in the future and so forth. Therefore, when they were invited to vote for something that was being promoted by the establishment, they wanted to give them a kick in the teeth. That was entirely understandable, but we needed to understand more about that experience of injustice and inequality.

It wasn't a deliberate side-lining from the perspective of 'Dear Leavers' to say, 'Let's not talk about the EU.' It was more about, 'Let's just go out and try and understand.' We went out to all parts of the country where there have been strong votes to Leave in order to listen and to really try to understand what was it that motivated people to vote Leave. It felt important for us to stress that voting to remain was not a vote for the status quo – because for far too many people, the status quo was intolerable.

That's what Another Europe is Possible was all about as well. It was actually about voting for something better and that we absolutely understood that the status quo was intolerable for far too many people and therefore needed to be changed.

**UKICE:** How was altering the status quo within your gift?

**CL:** It wasn't, obviously, but there was a group of us. Hugo Dixon was involved in this, David Willetts was involved as well. There was a small group of us who tried to bring that thinking into the steering group for the People's Vote campaign and to try to say, 'We as a People's Vote campaign should be making it much more explicit that a People's Vote was the beginning not the end of something.' It was the beginning of doing everything that we could in our respective parties to level up, as you might now say, using the phrase of the day.

Clearly, neither myself nor indeed anyone around the table at the People's Vote campaign could have delivered that on our own, but we could have all said, 'We will go back into our parties and absolutely make this a priority.'

**UKICE:** One of the criticisms of the Remain campaign that we've heard from people is that it was very metropolitan elitist. I just wondered what attempts you were making to bring in voices from what is now termed the 'red wall'. People's Vote also looked quite metropolitan.

**CL:** We begged them not to launch in bloody Camden. We begged them to go at least to Birmingham, even if they couldn't get any further north than that. That was something that we were terribly mindful of. Yes, there were reasons for it. I think probably they wanted to get the media coverage, which they thought would cover something in London and might not go somewhere else. There was the cost and convenience and so on and so forth, and all of those arguments swung many of the locations where things were done without people, I think, paying sufficient attention to the symbolism of what it looks like if you're launching something in Camden.

Yes, we were very much aware of needing to bring in different voices. I think that one thing we can be glad that happened was, for example, the role of Femi (Oluwole) and Our Future Our Choice. He was a great spokesperson because he was not the stereotypical spokesperson for the Remain campaign. Trying to get more space for him to be able to speak and other people from other parts of the country was certainly something we tried to do, but it didn't happen enough and it's a legitimate criticism.

## The Green Party and the general election

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**UKICE:** If we go to the general election, how much talk was there and how realistic was that talk of Remain alliances in particular constituencies?

**CL:** Well, we are always trying to break this hugely undemocratic electoral system and I think for us a Remain alliance on its own was never going to be enough. We wanted it to be linked to a commitment to change the electoral system. Well, not a commitment. The person you're standing down in seat X can't deliver that, but it was an important part of the discussions for us that any kind of alliance had to be about the longer-term changing of the voting system

so that we didn't have to do these kinds of backroom deals or whatever in the future.

**UKICE:** Did you ever think there was any prospect of bringing the Labour Party into a Remain alliance at that election or was that unthinkable?

**CL:** We asked and they were not forthcoming.

**UKICE:** How good was your relationship with the leader's office in the Labour Party at that time? Were relations cordial?

**CL:** They were cordial, but distant. That was always one of the frustrations, and I don't think I would be alone in saying that in terms of actually how did you get to speak to Jeremy. It was incredibly hard. He had layers of people between him and the outside world and that did make things much more difficult. Cordial, yes, but not terribly responsive.

**UKICE:** Were you surprised by the resonance of the Conservative 'Get Brexit Done' message at that and how they managed to use that to fashion such a positive outcome for them in it? Did it make you have second thoughts about whether actually if you'd got a referendum, you would win it given the relative success of that?

**CL:** I guess the strength of the win on the back of that did surprise me. We were never in any doubt that Boris Johnson would be a good campaigner on that issue and would come up with a couple of soundbites, as he did, and that it would always be harder for us with being an alliance of different groups with different tones and audiences and so forth. I don't think I would draw the conclusion from that to say that we couldn't have won a People's Vote though.

**UKICE:** During the Corbyn era clearly there was quite a lot of bleeding of the Green electorate and indeed some party members over to the Labour Party. How worried, as a leader of the Green Party, were you about that?

**CL:** Well, clearly it was a factor. How worried? I guess what we did was point to the fact that the policies that attracted people to go and join Labour were policies that had been longstanding policies of the Green Party and will remain

so – they've been so for the last 20 years and they will be for the next 20 years. And, that this was a leader who didn't command the full support of his parliamentary party and therefore it was a risky business to make that leap when you weren't sure how embedded those policies actually were in the party manifesto, as has come to pass.

With our electoral system you can understand why people would make the decision, but we did point out that all of the policies of redistribution or public ownership or so forth that the Labour Party was now talking about has been longstanding policies of the Green Party, plus Labour was not talking about, with the priority or with the ambition that we would, all of the environmental policies, the climate policies and so forth. We made clear that there were many policies that meant the Greens continued to be distinctive from Labour. Our Green New Deal, for example, was far more ambitious than their policies for a Green Industrial Revolution, and our commitment to local empowerment was very different from Labour's more top down approach.

**UKICE:** Looking to the long term for the Greens, the lack of European Parliament elections is presumably a massive blow because they were always an opportunity for you to showcase yourselves in a way that Westminster elections make it rather more difficult to do. Would that be true?

**CL:** I think sadly that is true. Yes, the European Parliament, as you say, gave us a high profile, winning seats in the parliament gave us credibility and authority, and indeed a bit of finance because with those posts came money for staff. Although the staff were, correctly and rightly, only working for those members, nonetheless overall it enhanced the reach and the profile of the party. We are working very closely with groups like Make Votes Matter, who I know are doing some great work trying to go round constituency Labour parties and encouraging them to put motions in to go up to the Labour Party Conference around the electoral system. It's certainly hard until that gets changed.

## The future of UK-EU relations

**UKICE:** Do you think re-join is a possibility, or will be a possibility in the short to medium term?



**CL:** I think probably in the medium to long term rather than in the short to medium term. I hope that there are aspects of the EU that we can bring back in, if you like. I'm thinking of things like the Erasmus programme or some of those things that really chimed with lots of the messaging we were trying to do with the People's Vote campaign, which was about the future for young people. It's their futures that have been closed down by this vote. I think some of those messages did have quite a lot of resonance and so I think what I can almost imagine is that different parts of the EU will be – I don't know what the word is – accreted, reaccreted, over time.

Then at some point, in a number of years hence – I don't see it happening any time soon, but in a number of years hence – I could imagine there would be a move to re-join, but not for the foreseeable future, for sure.

**UKICE:** What should be the positioning and tactics over the lifetime of this Parliament, say, from the people who are enthusiastically pro-European? You could argue the People's Vote mobilised a pro-European silent, not majority, but silent crowd that hadn't been there. What would be the best approach for people who think there are merits in close cooperation? Do you see opportunities if re-join the banner for time being?

**CL:** Yes. I certainly think there needs to be a strategy around that because so many people were mobilised and politicised for the first time ever and had an energy to bring to the wider political debate that hadn't been there before. Whether that does look like specific campaigns around Erasmus. I'm not suggesting that it would necessarily be around free movement because clearly that was one of the most controversial ones, but maybe about a more humane immigration policy generally. I'm not quite sure what that looks like yet, but I think it's absolutely the right question.

There certainly will be opportunities and we need to think what that actually looks like practically so that we can give people hope and then we can offer opportunities for engagement and bring their energy into the wider, Small 'P', political debate. Yes, I think that's going to be key.

**UKICE:** Do you see any appetite for that in other parties?

**CL:** I'm sure there will be. I haven't had those discussions, and obviously with

Covid-19 it's much harder now to have the discussions you might have had face to face around how we would do this. I would have thought that there would be quite a bit of interest and scope to do something like that. When we know where we are after 1 January, what the terms of the deal are, if there is one, then I think it'll be easier to then work out what that campaign looks like.

**UKICE:** The referendum, as we all know, created these two tribes. Those two tribes have been reflected a little bit in the way the electorate has been reshaped if you look at the nature of the Conservative coalition. Do you think that's going to have implications for politics going forward?

**CL:** To the extent that the Brexit debate reflected a much deeper debate about values, then particularly while we've got a Government right now that is deliberately trying to make political capital out of differences of perspective and views, then I fear it will influence politics going forward. Yes.

**UKICE:** I suppose just one very last question is, what do you think the real-world implications of Brexit are going to be? How do you think Brexit will manifest itself and do you think people will look at those implications and link them to the fact we've left the European Union?

**CL:** Well, I think the economic hit will be big and obviously others have said that partly that will be obscured by the Covid economic crisis that's overlayed on it. I'm sure that's true, that there will be some probably deliberate merging by ministers of what has been caused by what. Nonetheless, I think that if we do end up with higher tariffs, higher prices for goods in the shops, when people realise when they can travel again that it has become more difficult, I think it'll be some of those practical things, the roaming charges, the European health insurance, the passport for your dog, things that didn't take much oxygen in the bigger debate because individually they're not major issues. Yet just in terms of the new complexity of doing something that you've always done easily in the past, I think people will start to think, 'Hang on a minute, this is so much more complicated than I thought it was going to be.'

**UKICE:** Finally, on the other side, Caroline, you had Another Europe is Possible. Do you think the EU has done enough thinking about, not how to avoid another Brexit, but what the Brexit vote means for them

**CL:** No, I don't. I think that's a really good question and something that we tried to reach out to MEPs from other countries, within the Green group and more broadly, to say, 'This is a bit of a wake-up call.' I don't know what's happened just now with the different movements and some of those other countries that were for leaving. I guess, again, as with so much else, Covid has probably put some of that on ice. I do think that there is a massive lesson for the EU to learn in terms of its tone, and crucially in terms of its internal democracy and accountability.

We had, as part of our campaign, a big list of reforms that we wanted the EU to institute, whether that's as simple as making sure all of their meetings are live streamed and increasing the accessibility and transparency around documents, right through to giving the European Parliament more powers, powers of initiative and so forth. We work quite closely with DiEM (Democracy in Europe Movement 2025) and Yanis Varoufakis around a programme for EU reform. I've spoken a lot, as you say, about the changes that needed to happen in the UK that we were focusing on with 'Dear Leavers', but certainly there are big lessons for the EU in terms of its own internal democracy.

Again, it's one of those arguments that's slightly difficult to make. On trade policy, for example, one of the things I've been standing up in the Commons and saying is that under the Government's new trade policy I've got fewer rights than I had as an MEP in the European Parliament over trade policy. In some ways the EU has actually been ahead of the UK, but nonetheless, overall, its processes are not as accessible and transparent and as democratic as they should be. If they don't get this as a wake-up call to think that they need to change, then it will be a massively wasted moment.