

David Gauke



Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor January 2018 – July 2019

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions June 2017 – January 2018

Chief Secretary to the Treasury July 2016 – June 2017

Financial Secretary to the Treasury July 2014 – July 2016

Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury May 2010 to July 2014

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The Coalition Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): As you were sitting there in Government during the coalition, did you yourself feel that a referendum was inevitable?

David Gauke (DG): Yes, I think probably that's right. There's no doubt about it, a lot of this was about party management. There were significant elements of the Conservative Party that were feeling restless about our membership of the European Union. Whether they were campaigning for a referendum or whether it was just wanting to have a big fight about Europe at almost every opportunity, there was an issue there.

I think it would be fair to say that there was also a sense the right flank of the Cameron Government was under attack. You had UKIP and Nigel Farage. There was a sense of wanting to be able to neuter a populist party on the right. If you've taken away the issue of EU membership then you'd essentially dealt with that threat, so I think that was about shoring up on the right hand side while also working in coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

UKICE: How widespread was the concern about UKIP's electoral potential in a general election? I've always wondered whether the people pushing for a referendum in the Conservative Party were merely using the threat of that as leverage, or whether they were genuinely scared that UKIP might take seats from them and from other MPs.

DG: I think there was a genuine concern, but it wasn't so much about UKIP taking seats. One can look back on it knowing that in general elections UKIP, by and large, do not win seats. It was about taking votes off the Conservative Party sufficient that, in Labour/Conservative marginal, we would lose a lot of seats. I think there was a genuine concern but of course, for those who were campaigning to move us in the direction of a referendum, it was a very convenient argument.

That's not to say that there wasn't sincerity about it or, indeed, a genuine risk, particularly in that period of time when you had Douglas Carswell and then Mark Reckless going. Could there be others? Was there a sense that the party was in an uncomfortable position and could split?

UKICE: When did you know that the Prime Minister had made up his mind?

DG: I was a junior Treasury minister, so I didn't know until he delivered his Bloomberg speech. I didn't have any intimation beforehand, as far as I can recall. I can't remember how much speculation there was building up towards it. There certainly wasn't ministers taken to one side and said, 'This is what we're going to do.'

UKICE: What would you have advised, had you been taken to one side and asked for your opinion at that time?

DG: I'd love to be able to say I was much wiser at the time than I was. I thought we were in a pretty difficult position, that this was a way of resolving it. I thought that the Remain side would win.

The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Was there much discussion in the Treasury, while you were there, about whether there should be preparations for

a Leave vote? Was there just, pretty much, a sense that Remain will win?

David Gauke (DG): It wasn't just the sense that Remain would win. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was not confident about that. I think he always thought it was going to be pretty tight. After the experience of the Scottish referendum, there was a view saying, 'No, we're not going to do all the hard work and prepare for something that we don't want.' There was a consistency about that in terms of not doing the preparation.

Also, I think it would've been really hard to do the preparation. It's the same reason why David Cameron resigned the day after the referendum. Inevitably, you require big political choices, you require big decisions made by ministers as to the nature of the relationship.

If the Treasury had been given the task, 'Right, prepare for leaving the European Union.' They would be asking the question that the country found itself asking after the referendum, 'What does Brexit look like? What sort of Brexit do you mean?' The type of Brexit that George Osborne would've pursued, which would've been focused on minimising the economic harm, is a very different Brexit from the Brexit that Boris Johnson would pursue, that would focus on taking back control. Those are fundamentally big political choices.

I'm sceptical that there was some enormous technocratic project that could've been done, and say, 'Right, here you are minister, this is what Brexit looks like.' It fundamentally depends upon political choices. Could more have been done to educate ministers as to what the real trade-offs were? You can make that point, but you've got to have politicians willing to be educated for that to make any difference.

UKICE: Do you think one of the failures of the Remain campaign was their failure to pin down the leavers on exactly what they wanted of Brexit?

DG: Yes, absolutely. I remember a conversation with George (Osborne) very early on in this process, it was actually in the margins of a budget preparation meeting at Dorneywood. We were discussing this. My view, at this point, was 'We'll win because we'll force them to decide. What sort of Brexit is it? Is it leaving the Single Market, which is economic disaster, or is it staying in the

Single Market, which doesn't give them any of the freedom that they're talking about?'

George was obviously very familiar with the argument but I detected, if you like, less optimism from him that we would be able to get that argument over. Yes it was a failure but there was a real attempt, I think, to pin them down. They were sufficiently slippery to get out of any hold that we might have had on them.

There were various times, in the course of the campaign, when you had this model, that model, being talked about. In the end, Vote Leave did say, 'We'll be out of the Single Market and so on.'

UKICE: It has been said that the Remain camp learned all the wrong lessons from the Scottish referendum – that project fear works. The Leave camp learned all the right lessons from the referendum campaign – don't pin yourself down. Would you go along with that?

DG: Yes, I think there is something on that. I think that, when it came to the decision as to what sort of campaign Remain had to run I supported, at the time, that you did have to focus on economic risk. Some people say we should have been more positive about Europe and set out the emotional case for it. You couldn't do that in the course of a short campaign. That wasn't going to work, so I think it was probably right that we ran a project fear type of campaign, we just couldn't find a way of landing it.

I think it was too Tory, it was too David and George, but we know the reasons why the Labour Party weren't playing. That made it much, much, harder. Unfortunately, previous Labour leaders didn't have the sway over the traditional Labour support that one would've liked.

As far as Leave campaign learning the right lessons from Scotland, I think that's probably right. The fact that they kept it as vague as possible. They said, 'Okay, we will leave the Single Market.' Yet they never accepted the consequences of leaving the Single market. Indeed, even after the referendum, you still had people like David Davis, months later, talking about how we'll retain exactly the same benefits of Single Market membership.

At one level I think, at least with some of them, they never fully recognised the trade-offs. They were sincere, not just evasive. They were sincere that there weren't going to be trade-offs, that we were going to get the best of all. I think that- You know, completely delusional but I think that delusion persisted for a very long time and, in one or two cases, may continue to persist.

UKICE: Were you surprised how hard the Leave campaign ran on immigration?

DG: No, no. I think they had to, I think that was their issue. I think it was always the vulnerability for the Remain camp. From my perspective, the biggest criticism of the Remain camp was not getting a strong position on immigration. Partly, we started off on the wrong foot through an overly ambitious, undeliverable objective in the negotiations on immigration. Then finding that we don't deliver that and you start off the campaign in a defensive position. We allowed expectations of what was achievable to be too great, we underwhelmed on that, and that put us at a disadvantage.

Returning to the Leave campaign, I think that was absolutely the right issue for them. That's what their voters really cared about it. All this talk that, 'Oh, it was nothing to do with immigration and so on,' is utter nonsense. You couldn't meet a Leave voter who didn't talk about immigration within a minute in my experience.

UKICE: Did it surprise you that people like Michael Gove were talking about Turkey joining imminently. Were you surprised at what they were prepared to say about immigration?

DG: I think, when it comes to what was said about trade-offs I'm happy to be, I think, reasonably generous in terms of them being delusional rather than dishonest on trade. When it comes to Turkey, that was dishonest.

UKICE: What about the role of the Treasury in the referendum, both putting out the initial assessments of the alternatives but then later on providing what might be called the raw material for the emergency Budget announcement. Was there is any sort of pushback from officials within the Treasury about whether the work on the emergency budget was an appropriate use of Government resources, or did the Treasury just see that as part of serving the

Government of the day?

DG: I wasn't aware of any pushback. To be fair, I wasn't as directly involved in this as others would've been, but I wasn't aware of any pushback. The experience of the Scottish referendum was that the Treasury very much took the lead on that. I certainly don't remember any pushback from the Treasury on that front, indeed far from it.

Let's put it this way. I think that Sir Nicholas (Macpherson), as he then was, a staunch unionist, considered that to be the duty of the Treasury, to ensure that the economic risks of Scottish independence were in the forefront of the minds of the Scottish voter. I didn't pick up any sense that the Treasury felt it was being misused.

UKICE: When the short-term forecast came out in the April there was, to put it charitably, a slightly misleading headline as to what those forecasts said splashed all over the Treasury's website that day. Was there no unease?

DG: I can remember a lot of unease from Conservative Leavers who were absolutely furious. 'We are going to kill George for this,' was the atmosphere.

UKICE: How much do you buy the interpretation that Cameron and Osborne were fighting the whole thing with one hand behind their backs because they believed they were going to win, and therefore needed the party to be able to come together afterwards?

DG: Yes, I think that's right. There were things that were said or done by my former colleagues that were not compatible with being a minister in David Cameron's Government. There were things that were said that were so obviously dishonest, let alone disloyal. I think, absolutely, that Boris (Johnson) and Michael (Gove), for example, didn't get the rubbishing that a political opponent in another party would've got. I do think that Vote Leave should've been hit harder. I do think there probably should've been some sackings in the course of the campaign. I think there was a sense of ... not complacency as such but, you know, 'We're going to have to bring the party back together afterwards.' I don't think there was any concern, on the other side, about that, other than with a few notable exceptions. Chris Grayling in particular, one sensed that Chris was thinking about the party afterwards. I don't think many

others on the Vote Leave side were thinking like that.

UKICE: After the referendum result, was there a consensus view within the Treasury about what kind of Brexit they would need to prepare for, did people make assumptions?

DG: I think there was a sense of shock, first of all. It did take a moment or so in which to take it all in. There was then a question of, 'What sort of Brexit are we talking about?' I can remember conversation with a Treasury official who said, 'Well look, by and large, obviously we think it's sensible to have as good access to European markets as possible and reduced trade barriers.' However you've got this issue of financial services, and we didn't want to be a rule-taker.

What we're going to lose, anyway, from leaving the European Union, is baked in. There is a certain amount that you just can't protect, whatever sort of deal we got, so we have to be quite pragmatic as to the nature of our relationship here. You know, it's not just about trying to keep as close to the existing relationship as possible, it is a bit more complex than that. By and large, the instinct of the Treasury was as soft a Brexit as we can get away with because the harder the Brexit the greater the economic pain.

The First May Government

UKICE: Once you heard the Prime Minister's speeches at party conference and Lancaster House, did you think, 'That's it, soft Brexit is gone, there's no path back to that now?'

DG: I suppose there was a recognition that this was not going to be the softest of soft Brexits. You know, a certain amount of hardness of the Brexit was implicit in everything that she was saying. You could go back even earlier, to some extent. I can remember, during the leadership election campaign, going in to see Theresa. I voted for her, I publicly backed her. Before I did so, I went and had a conversation. She was already saying, 'We're going to need our own trade policy and to enter trade deals with other countries and so on.' I was immediately struck by that, that was actually a really big decision that had been taken and meant we're leaving the customs union with all that entails.

That was something that was never, particularly, put under any great scrutiny. It was there at the very beginning and Theresa made that clear early on. She created the Department for International Trade. Already, you could see the direction that we were going in.

Yes, particularly that first period up to and including the general election where Nick Timothy was obviously joint chief of staff and approaching this in a particular way, there was clearly a move to a pretty hard Brexit. You know, still looking to get a deal.

I think there was always a sense that nothing was ever completely final. There's a certain amount of negotiating that goes in, so you set out a particular vision. Is that irrevocable? Could it be that, when we come down to it, the position moves a bit? There was never a question of completely giving up on a softer Brexit but, yes, there was a sense ... the party conference speech, Lancaster House, we were heading in a particular direction. There was concern within the Treasury about that.

UKICE: Did the Treasury regard the customs union as a fight still worth having, that there was space there to be making the case for closer links, or were you basically assuming, 'Number 10 has made a decision, they know what they're doing, we have to live with it and make the best of it we can?'

DG: Look, Philip Hammond would've been obviously closer to this. But I think it was somewhere in between the two. On the one hand, a sense of, 'There are significant implications of what is being said here. Have Number 10 necessarily, fully, appreciated all of those implications and what flows from what has been said?' On the other hand, the sort of sense that within Number 10 this is the vision that they're going for.

I think there was some hope that maybe, post-election, if she'd managed to get a majority, there might have been a softening of the position and she wouldn't be quite so beholden to the ERG. So, again, not a sense that everything was lost. And, partly I do wonder, even at that point, whether the Prime Minister and Number 10 hadn't fully appreciated what the trade-offs were, even as late as the end of 2016.

UKICE: Do you think the Prime Minister ever seriously believed that no deal

was better than a bad deal?

DG: It was always very hard to know with Theresa, to the extent that some of us stuck our necks out in February and March of last year because even at that point we weren't entirely sure which way she would jump. I think, with the benefit of hindsight and having talked to people around her who perhaps knew her mind and certainly spent much more time with her than some of us did, in the end she wouldn't have gone with no deal. I think it was in the end the visits to Northern Ireland in early 2019 that finally forced her mind, as it were, and moved her to a position of saying that it would be irresponsible to leave without a deal. I think, you know, if you go back to 2017 and apply a truth drug to her... Actually, I think she's a pretty honest politician in any event. I think she was sincere that you had to have the risk of no deal.

UKICE: Do you think it encouraged some people on the ERG side to actually think that they could leave without a deal?

DG: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. It normalised the idea of no deal. The difficulty, for those of us who were always against no deal, is that if you go into a negotiation and you can't walk away then you're not going to do terribly well. That's, in truth, the reason why we shouldn't have been leaving. That was an argument to make and win in 2016. You know, you were meeting business people, they would say, 'Well, of course you've got to have the ability to walk away.' Of course, there's much to that. It's just that the implications for us were so serious. Did it normalise it? Yes, it did. Was there a group that were always after no deal, that was their preferred objective? I don't think, if you went back to 2017, that's really what many people wanted.

I think what the likes of the ERG wanted was something that they were never going to get. They basically wanted complete freedom and flexibility and no constraints, and maintaining exactly the same access to EU markets. They genuinely thought that they could get that because they want to sell us their cars and prosecco, so we can have whatever we like. I think that's what they genuinely thought. So I don't think there was a group that were always wanting no deal.

What it did mean is that when you started to face up to the realities and you said, 'These are the concessions that we need to make.' You had lots of

people who said, 'Hold on, hold on, that's a bad deal, that's not what I consider to be a good deal.' The definition of good deal became completely unrealistic, and anything that fell below that was something that was unacceptable to agree to, and no deal was an acceptable alternative.

UKICE: What was the view in the Treasury, in this period, of the other thing the Prime Minister did in the conference speech, which was to set the deadline for triggering Article 50?

DG: I suppose one thing I'd say, particularly when it comes to the party conference speeches and asking 'What was the Treasury thinking?' Of course, the Treasury consists of Treasury ministers and Treasury officials. Because it was party conference, because we were in Birmingham, we didn't have any officials around us. I don't know what the senior officials were thinking about that. I did speak to Philip (Hammond) a lot in the course of that party conference. I think there was a bit of a sense that there was an inevitability we were going to have to set this date.

Again, with the benefit of hindsight, it was a tactical and strategic error to box ourselves in. There's obviously an argument that says, 'We don't trigger Article 50 until we start to get some things out of the EU.' There was a bit of that. I think that thought would certainly have crossed Philip's mind.

We also have to remember the political context. The pressure was starting to build. We're now several months since the referendum date. There was this expectation that Article 50 was going to be triggered the day after, with people asking 'Why have we not triggered it?' I don't think there was a huge amount of political pressure but if the Prime Minister had said, 'We've got a cunning plan, we're not going to trigger Article 50 until we've got the deal done.' I think there would've been uproar, no one would've understood. Hardly anyone would've understood why that was the route that we were taking, it would've come as a big surprise. So, to some extent, the political reality and the party management side required Article 50 to be triggered.

The Second May Government

UKICE: Do you think, once the election happened in 2017, there was an opportunity, to reorient policy towards a softer Brexit?

DG: I'm not sure that there was a big opportunity. Remember the days after the general election, there was a sense that the Prime Minister might fall any moment. We were then very quickly into Grenfell, which further made the political situation very difficult. There were a few of us that used to discuss, whether was there the opportunity then to try to reach out to other parties and try to create a Committee of the Whole House and bring everybody in.

I guess the experience of 2019 shows how difficult it is to do that. No opposition is necessarily going to come to the Government's rescue after a general election just like that. Jeremy Corbyn would probably be the last person to do that. So I'm not sure that there was an opportunity.

Having said that, all choices were so dismal at that point, one couldn't really see what the way out was. We, in the end, got there, or attempted to get there, in 2019. I don't see any particular reason why that would've been more likely to have worked in July 2017 than it subsequently did in April 2019. In fact, it was less likely to work.

UKICE: Could Theresa May have remained leader if she'd tried to reach out in July 2017?

DG: I doubt it, I very much doubt it. Reaching out to Labour, in the spring of 2019, proved to be fatal for her, I think her position was very, very, fragile. One can never say for sure. At one level, from her point of view, I wonder whether she wonders whether she should've done that to avoid the two years of pain that she put herself through. It would've been very, very, difficult. I think that the chances of success were pretty small.

UKICE: Was there no internal dissent about the deal with the DUP?

DG: There was certainly no dissent that I was aware of in the Cabinet. That was the only way of making the numbers add up. There was a strong desire, which we all shared, to ensure that Jeremy Corbyn was nowhere near power. That was the only way of making it work.

UKICE: How serious was the risk to Theresa May's leadership after the election?

DG: Had the senior figures within the Cabinet all rallied around one figure, they could've forced her out. Had Boris, David, Philip, all said, 'Right, she's got to go.' Yes, her position was very, very, fragile but there wasn't a consensus about one other candidate and there was quite a lot of opposition to any potential successor.

UKICE: Were there conversations about that?

DG: Not that I was involved in, or particularly know about. That's not to say that there weren't conversations, but it never got down to the junior members of the Cabinet.

UKICE: You were at the Chequers meeting. When it ended, did you feel that actually some kind of unity had been hammered out or did you feel there was a danger of what happened happening?

DG: It felt, by the end of the evening, as if it had gone pretty well. There was one moment, I think it was at lunchtime. I was with Damian Hinds. We walked into one of the rooms in which we'd been doing the breakout sessions all that day. David Davis was talking to somebody. I can't remember, for the life of me, who it was he was talking to, but somebody in the centre as it were. He said, 'If they think I'm just going to accept this and we're fine, you've got another thing coming.' I thought, 'Okay.' Damian and I were looking at each other. That was quite early on in the day. We had the afternoon session. There was obviously a huge split within the Cabinet but the majority were supporting what the Prime Minister was trying to do.

The Prime Minister summed up at the end of the long and very hot session. She said, 'Right, I'm going to do this.' There was a kind of, 'Okay.' Then we all wandered off and we had a drink in the garden. Then we had the dinner and it was all quite jolly.

David stood up and gave us some advice and tips about how we should be engaging with our counterparts over the course of the summer, which was all very constructive. Boris talked about having a hymn sheet to sing from and, I must admit, notwithstanding the incident at lunchtime, I sort of thought we'd got over that difficulty. At the end of that day it sort of felt, 'We've got somewhere.'

UKICE: Presumably, then, you were subsequently very surprised when Davis walked, when Johnson walked. Did you think, then, 'This Government could collapse' at that point?

DG: I was very worried at this point. It wasn't necessarily about the Government was imminently going to split, but it was a sense that the Conservative Party as I'd seen it was in a very fragile position.

Things had not gone well. That weekend had gone badly. It had landed badly with the Conservative Party, MPs were kicking off, our comms were not good. This had all come as a big surprise to people because Chequers was, to some extent, the first time that, as a Cabinet, we'd faced up to the real trade-offs. Although Cabinet had faced up to that, it still came as a bit of a shock to the wider Conservative party that there were these trade-offs and we were going to have to live in the real world.

I do remember a conversation with a parliamentary colleague and friend not long after Chequers. At that point, I wondered whether I would be fighting the next general election as a Conservative.

Not to say I necessarily anticipated I'd be running as an independent or anything like that. The response to Chequers, which was a sort of roar of disapproval from the wider Conservative movement and a sense that, 'No, we are not going to compromise on any of this and we're not going to make any trade-offs. If necessary, we will go no deal.' I think Chequers, or the response to Chequers, illustrated, in a way that to some extent surprised me, the fact that the Conservative Party was further gone than I had appreciated. I did appreciate it at that point and I think I was probably several months ahead of a lot of others.

UKICE: Did negotiability with the EU feature in the Chequers discussion?

DG: It did, but not heavily. I think there was a bit of 'Well, they'll not immediately react to this favourably but this is the route through.' I remember wondering, at the time – though this was an unspoken doubt, I should be clear, as I didn't want to say anything that was going to be unhelpful to getting support behind this proposition.

What was essentially presented to us was, 'Either there is no deal, there's Canada but what they're offering with Canada is Great Britain only funnily enough, then there's EEA. Those are the options, and we think we've got to find something bespoke.' So you had those of us who were of a mind to say, 'Well, if that's the next thing to try, at least we are facing up to the realities. Let's go for that.' You had those who said, 'No, this is conceding too much and it's unacceptable.' Those who were broadly supportive weren't going to then divide. So we didn't really dwell on that side of things, it was whether it was worth giving it a go or not. But yes, it didn't find support in the EU either, which obviously made it much more difficult.

UKICE: Could more have been done to sell Chequers, both, in Europe and in the UK as a sensible outcome following a 52-48 result, or was it fundamentally unsellable?

DG: If I remember rightly, I think it was Michael (Gove) who did the Sunday interviews. Michael is very articulate and the Brexiteer who fell in behind it. He was the key casting vote, if you like, in the Cabinet meeting at Chequers, if I can use that simplification. Actually, that was a weekend where Theresa probably needed to lead from the front. I don't think the comms were impressive that weekend, we didn't sell it well.

UKICE: Given that, ultimately, choices had to be made, do you think it was a mistake to try to keep the Cabinet balanced?

DG: Yes, it's a very fair question. It's a little bit like the issue of, should she have reached out immediately after the general election? When you end up with, essentially, the whole project failing, you look back at various things and, 'Could they have been done differently?' You know, why not, it couldn't have ended up any worse than it actually was. It might have brought the end earlier but that might be a blessed relief. You can ask yourselves those questions but I suspect that, if there hadn't been an attempt to balance the Cabinet in the way that she did, then the ERG would've gone for her earlier and probably taken her out.

Supporters of the current Government would say, 'When things actually worked was when the other side took control.' They had the support of the wider Conservative movement, the parliamentary party, the members, a lot of

the voters. Then you could have not necessarily a coherent position but certainly a unified position that you then pursue and so on. For what I would consider to be the pragmatic side of the party to try to govern without the ERG side: it's hard to see that would've worked for more than a few weeks, probably not more than a few days. The letters would've flown in to Sir Graham (Brady) and probably with a different result than that that was achieved in December 2018.

UKICE: Were you surprised by the scale of the defeat in the first meaningful vote?

DG: A little bit. It was clear we were going to lose badly but the hope that it would be a bit closer ... I remember going through the lobbies and my first thought was, 'There's nobody here.' Tumbleweed blowing. It just felt like being in opposition on a Private Member's Bill. Just really quiet. I remember sitting on the front bench and Sajid (Javid) came in. He was one of the last to be counted and he said what the number was, and pulled a face. I think it was worse than we expected.

UKICE: Why was the decision taken to go for it and not pull it again?

DG: Exactly. Yes, it had already been pulled once and there was a kind of desperation. What else do we do? I think someone else came up with this analogy. It was like the Government, the Prime Minister, was standing on a rock in the middle of a minefield and she had to get to the other side but pretty well ever direction there was a mine. As long as she kept standing on the rock she could survive. The moment she tried to do something, the moment that she would've tried reaching out to the Labour Party she would've stood on a mine. The moment she would've tried to get a unified Cabinet, and let the Brexiteers go, she would've stood on a mine.

It was just an impossible position that she was in. The combination of the general election and the combination of the fact that with very, very, few exceptions – Michael Gove being the notable one – the Brexiteer side had not accepted that, 'It was 52-48, we're going to have to compromise, we're not going to get everything that we promised the British people. Looking at it, we were wrong to have promised all of that because you can't deliver all of that. The economic pain of no deal, which is where we are heading to, is just

something that no responsible Government could do.’ That didn’t happen, apart from with Michael and maybe one or two others.

Those two factors, no majority and the ERG side digging in, meant there were no good options.

UKICE: In January, there was the Brady amendment which appeared, temporarily, to unify the party. Was there any real expectation that the clarifications the Prime Minister came back with, potentially accompanied by a slightly more helpful steer from the Attorney General, might have actually pulled a trick off?

DG: There was always hope, there was always hope. I’d like to think that Theresa was more optimistic than, perhaps, I was – and that she didn’t see herself on the boulder in the middle of a landmine field. There was a hope that something might turn up and that something might deliver. The Brady amendment was a unicorn, I voted for it as we all were required to do but it was never going to go anywhere. It was not negotiable, that one really wasn’t negotiable. Pretending otherwise, I think, was unfortunate. I think that was a bit of a sop to the Brexiteer side that encouraged them to continue to believe in some fanciful thinking. It was never a route out.

UKICE: The impression from the outside – using your minefield analogy – was that we had a Prime Minister who just thought if you walk briskly through you’ll be fine, and little real sense of trying to plot a course or to think strategically.

DG: Yes, I think that’s probably fair. In defence, I’m not sure that there was a course that could’ve been plotted. So what choice did she have? ‘Well, I’ll just give it a go. Who knows, I just might find a line through this field where no mine has been placed, I might be lucky.’

UKICE: When did you think the deal was dead?

DG: It’s a good question. I’m not sure there was one moment. I don’t know. I suppose the flipside is when did I think it was alive? Again, there was always just a slither that maybe, somehow, this is going to work, there was a small light there that was gradually extinguished. I’m not sure that there was any particular moment, it was just stages as each meaningful vote came up and

each defeat. It got less but they were still huge defeats.

UKICE: With all the parliamentary activity that was going on in that very fraught period, things like indicative votes and Parliament trying to take control of the agenda, did anyone, people sitting around the Cabinet table, think, ‘Actually, this might crystallise some way forward. Maybe we could more actively try to manage that process?’ Was it actually ever going to show something positive for something like the Ken Clarke customs union proposal?

DG: Some of those weren’t far away from succeeding, admittedly with the Cabinet forced to abstain. Probably, most of the Cabinet would’ve voted against some of those ideas but not all. I think there was a little bit of a hope that it might come up. Some of us were arguing the case for trying indicative votes, that was a possible route through. Of course, that meant abandoning the deal. Some of us, even relatively early on – not around the Cabinet table, privately – were urging the Prime Minister to consider her deal with a referendum. At that point, there was a hope that something might happen.

UKICE: I was intrigued, at the time, by the prospect of her deal versus no deal in a referendum. Did you have a view on how that might pan out?

DG: Apparently, the only referendum bill that could get through would be one that had Remain as an option. So the idea of her deal versus no deal, that would not have been something I would’ve supported. I don’t think it would’ve been responsible to have gone down that route. There’s just too much of a risk that we would’ve ended up with no deal. And you know, what does no deal actually mean?

The only thing that you could offer concretely would be a Remain option. Theresa was never going to run with that, but some of us did privately urge her to say that is a route through. If not, it was the customs union idea. The difficulty was, from a party management point of view, that would be impossible. Had the customs union thing gone through, I would’ve voted for it if I’d had a vote, you would’ve had a relatively small number of Conservative MPs supporting it. A lot of Labour MPs supporting it and then a Conservative Government implementing a policy that, essentially, most Conservatives couldn’t support. It would’ve been a mess but, at one point, that seemed to be the least worst option.

UKICE: What were your thoughts when you saw the Prime Minister's 'people versus parliament' televised address?

DG: I didn't like it at all. I thought it was the wrong. She reconsidered, reasonably quickly, herself. I thought that was the rhetoric that had got us into this mess in the first place. I can understand her frustration, that there are those who said, 'I want to get a deal.' yet they won't support the only deal that was on the table, or even allow that to get moving. I could understand her frustration with them and frustration with those who argued for leaving the European Union but won't face up to the realities of what that looks like. I could understand her frustrations, I wasn't completely furious and condemnatory about it, but I thought it was the wrong approach and, indeed, counterproductive.

After Government

UKICE: Can we take you to the leadership contest now: did you think Boris was unstoppable?

DG: Pretty well, yes. The only possible thing that could've stopped Boris was Boris. Notwithstanding spilling a glass of wine over a sofa, there wasn't really much sign of Boris doing that. It felt that it was overwhelmingly his to lose.

UKICE: Where was your own local association on that, did you get a sense from them where they were?

DG: Yes. I think there was quite a lot of support for Boris. At that very time, I was going through the process- Some of them were trying to deselect me. Albeit a minority. I sort of saw it off reasonably comfortably for all the good it did me. I think there was quite a lot of, 'We've got to get Brexit done, we've got to bring this to an end.' Not a huge sense, a wave of enthusiasm for Boris. From some, yes. You had a smallish minority that were kind of, 'Yes, Boris is fantastic, he's great, just what we need.' You had, perhaps, a larger minority who were, 'Oh God, are we serious? I can't stand that man as Prime Minister, seriously?' Then you had, probably, the larger group which was, 'Well I'm not entirely sure about Boris Johnson as Prime Minister but we need a winner. We need someone who will get this sorted and who can communicate, Boris is the right person for the job.' That was, kind of, a large part, I think, of the

membership and a large part of his vote.

UKICE: How crucial were the European Parliament election results?. If those elections hadn't happened when they happened, would things have worked out differently?

DG: I think it was pretty significant. It wasn't just the European elections, also the local government elections. The two, between them, where the Conservatives did very badly, particularly the European elections. The fear of Farage was really strong. 'We need someone who can face down Farage,' counted for a lot. I had my association chairman, who was studiously neutral during the deselection process, he's an interesting case study. By the time we got to later on into the year, his line was, 'You need to back the Prime Minister.'

He'd lost his council seat to the Liberal Democrats. Rather than taking the conclusion that maybe we should have a position that appealed more to Liberal Democrat voters, his position was, 'Well, it was the Conservatives who stayed at home that were the problem.' I'm not dismissing that, there's something in that. 'Conservatives stayed at home, I lost my council seat because we haven't delivered Brexit. There's no future for the party unless we deliver Brexit. Boris is the person to deliver Brexit, don't you stand in the way of that.' That was the gist of the conversations I had with him after the deselection process.

UKICE: Did that include delivering Brexit by any means possible – like challenging convention and proroguing Parliament?

DG: My association is quite an interesting one because of what happened subsequently. There were a lot of Conservative Party members who were very uncomfortable with the nature of the Government, particularly in that September. I know plenty of Conservative Party members who voted for me as an independent in the general election, but my former chairman, I suspect, was probably more typical, whose view was, 'Our supporters want to get Brexit done, we have to get Brexit done, Boris is the person to do that. If he breaks a few eggs on the way to doing it then so be it'. Obviously, it wasn't the approach I took but I think that was probably where most of the Conservative Party was.

UKICE: When you defied the whips what did you expect to happen?

DG: I expected to lose the whip. Obviously, I wasn't 100% sure that they were going to withdraw the whip but I always thought it was likely that would be the consequence. Then, when they did that, I think it was leaked to James Forsyth. His Sun piece said that's what they're going to do. I got a text from a senior journalist who said, 'Number 10 are saying, 'Yes, they're going to lose the whip.'"

I had, genuinely, mixed feelings about it. Of course there was a side of going, 'Oh God, yes, this is serious.' Actually, at that point, I was so angry with the Government over their behaviour, the prorogation. I was up for a fight, frankly. I quite enjoyed it.

UKICE: Were you surprised that the SNP and the Lib Dems conceded an election or wanted one?

DG: Yes, I was. Again, one has to look at, 'What's the counterfactual?' There was the real risks that, 'Could the Government run down the clock until the end of January? What mechanisms are available?' The fact that the Speaker was standing down might have made it harder to control the order paper again. There were some of my colleagues who'd rebelled the once, were they willing to rebel again? Given that the Prime Minister had got a deal, admittedly only a withdrawal agreement but had got a deal, where was it all going to go?

As it turned out, it was evidently a mistake. I thought it was very, very, high risk at the time, to have a general election. From my own personal point of view, I knew it was bad news because I hadn't recovered the whip and there was always this thought, 'If this thing drags on for a lot longer, the situation might change. There might be an olive branch offered.' From my point of view, I could see it being pretty disastrous, the fact that there was a general election. It was a mistake but I had a slither of sympathy on the basis that there wasn't an obvious route out of this.

UKICE: Was the passage of the Benn-Burt Act actually what catalysed the Prime Minister to look for a deal and get a deal so he could be seen to be trying to deliver his 31st October exit. Or did you get the sense that Number 10 was already thinking along the lines of pivoting and doing a deal with the EU?

DG: I think, very much, the former. I saw no evidence – and speaking to those who were on the inside, they had no evidence – that the Government was particularly moving towards the nature of the deal that they subsequently agreed to. There was no real energy going into getting a deal. The energy was going into preparing for no deal. Boris had not, in any way, internalised the trade-offs in getting a deal.

I think, absolutely, it was the Benn-Burt Act that forced them to the negotiating table and essentially going back to the offer that the EU had made early on, that Theresa May talked about at Chequers, which was Canada minus Northern Ireland. That's, essentially, where he got to. Something that was unacceptable to Boris Johnson in 2018 but, because that was better than sticking around after the 31st October. I think they were genuinely really worried about the consequences of still being in the EU on the 1st November.

UKICE: So that deal passes but then the Government loses the timetable motion. I'm just interested in what was going through your mind when you were voting on the timetable motion.

DG: I voted for the timetable motion, fully accepting the point that it wasn't long enough. I, essentially, did a deal with the Government. I got a commitment from the despatch box that, in the event of no final deal being agreed, there would be a vote in the House of Commons that would enable parliament to instruct the Government to extend the transition period. I thought that was a useful thing to have achieved, and I was prepared to trade my vote on that basis. To be fair, having a pretty good understanding that the Government were going to lose the timetable motion anyway. So that was the position I took.

At that point, I'm not sure people were expecting a general election. I don't think people were expecting the pressure from the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, or that they would make that kind of move.

I'm also not sure whether people fully believed that they were going to pull the bill. In fact, you know, the assumption was 'Won't the Government just work their way through the bill?' I think what they were aware of was the risks that, from their perspective, the bill could be sabotaged, that there could be amendments that they didn't like. They didn't want to put the bill up there,

they didn't think they had the numbers to control where the bill was going to go.

UKICE: Did you ever think that a Government of National Unity was a runner?

DG: I think the Jeremy Corbyn problem was too great, and I couldn't see – unless something remarkable had happened, involving Jeremy Corbyn and the number 11 bus – it was hard to see that there was a way through that. I did think it was worth thinking about whether it could operate. There were, obviously, conversations that were going on as to whether that could happen. The Jeremy Corbyn factor essentially ruled out any possibility.

UKICE: Do you think that the kind of Toryism that existed pre-Brexit can be returned to, or has the party changed irrevocably?

DG: I think it can, it certainly can swing back. I think the probability is that it won't swing back. I think that's partly driven by the demographics. I think there is a section of society, if you like, that has traditionally voted left on economic grounds but is now more likely to vote right on cultural grounds. We've seen that, not just in the UK but obviously in the US and elsewhere as well.

I think the Conservative Party, probably triggered by Brexit, seized that opportunity. If it were to turn into a more traditional pro-business, pragmatic, liberal conservative, socially liberal type of party, a David Cameron type of party, it would lose the support of a lot of those voters and a lot of those constituencies. I think, once you start going down the route that the party has gone down, there's quite a big cost to give up all of that. I think you have to keep, if you like, giving those voters what they want. That requires a very culturally conservative, more economically interventionist, Government than one I would be comfortable with.

I think the more probable route is that we are going to see some kind of realignment of politics. That's incredibly difficult to do in the first past the post system. Some of us have tried and failed in terms of shaking that up. I think if we were ever to have some sort of electoral reform, and we'll see where Keir Starmer wants to go on that, then I think you would see the Conservative coalition break up very, very, quickly. Even if it doesn't happen, I think the

probable route for electoral success, at least for the next few years, is as a pretty Brexit, tough on immigration, culturally conservative, tough on law and order, type of party. The electoral gravity moves them in that direction.