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UKIP, 2004 – 2016

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Just thinking back to the first stage of your UKIP career: when would you say that politicians and the media started to take the idea of a referendum on membership seriously, and why?

Gawain Towler (GT): I think that there was a momentary flash in the pan over Maastricht. Obviously, the Lib Dems had their policy of ‘We support a referendum until we’re going to have one.’ There were also a few Tory backbenchers and a couple of Labour backbenchers who were minded in that direction, but it was not serious.

I suppose going backwards; Jimmy Goldsmith scared the pants out of everybody, forcing the Government to offer a referendum in the likelihood of us joining the Euro, and thus effectively scuppering our entry into the Euro. Period.

So, the existential threat of a referendum was taken seriously significantly earlier, but that had gone away. As long as nobody in Government seriously considered the Euro. And Gordon Brown’s five tests were just essentially, ‘I’m going to make up what they are at the time, to ensure this doesn’t

happen, because we can't afford to leave or have a referendum.'

So, I would say a referendum only really started being taken seriously again when Cameron three-line whipped against one. Cameron put a three-line whip against a Private Members Bill for a referendum. The fact that the Government felt it needed to three-line whip against it suggested that they were taking it seriously.

That's where our ears pricked up, 'Oh, hello, they're scared of that. Oh, goodie, let's see what we can do.' It was that sort of thing.

And it was seeing how the other side reacted to what was essentially a punt at that time, and seeing the real fear behind the eyes of the establishment, and particularly in the Conservative Party establishment. The need to three-line whip against it made us think, 'Hello, this is interesting.'

UKICE: And at the same time, presumably, opinions were hardening amongst some Tory MPs who hadn't talked in those terms before, but came to talk in those terms?

GT: Oh, without doubt, and the three-line whip did that to them too. People who were vaguely sympathetic to the idea of a referendum were being told there's no pairing, there's nothing like this and said 'Hold on.' And people who were sympathetic became much more staunch.

UKICE: The other big moment often cited is the decision not to put any controls on migration from the A8 countries in 2004. Did you see that as an opportunity?

GT: At the time, not really. I mean, between 1999 and 2004, that first term that Farage was in, I don't think he mentioned immigration once.

A little bit like the AfD in Germany, it started as a bunch of academics talking about constitutional issues in one upper room in Whitehall once every three months.

And that was what UKIP was; it wasn't a populist party at all at that point. The free movement of people had worked very well because you were dealing with

countries of similar economic growth and development where the average between 1947 and 1997 had been around about 30,000 to 35,000 net migration. The free movement was between countries that were similar.

Then you had the whole business of MigrationWatch being set up by Lord Green and starting to throw some questions into the ether. The obviously, and I'm sorry to say, deliberately economically and socially illiterate argument of the Government was to say, 'Oh, only 13,000 will come.' It was preposterous. And it must have been preposterous to everybody, the people who were proposing it as much as people who opposed it.

UKICE: Unless you are assuming that no-one else would put controls on either? I mean, that makes sense if you think the Germans or French would do likewise and not implement controls?

GT: And only the Irish did. And we were in the way. It was far easier to wash up on the shores of England than Ireland if you're coming from the continent.

But I don't believe that any continental country in the old EU, the pre-enlargement EU ever suggested that they were going to do that, and so for the Government to suggest that, 'Oh well, if every other country does this, then we'll only get that,' when there was no suggestion in Brussels at council that anybody else was going to do it.

So yes, you could make that argument, but it would be specious.

UKICE: Did 'the establishment' fail to react as they could have, or was there more they could've done as opinions were changing, do you think?

GT: I think it was convenient. I think you're dealing with an establishment that wanted to, what was it; 'rub the Right's nose in diversity', and the Blair establishment had that attitude. It was deliberate; they were the masters now and they were going to bloody well do what they hell they wanted, and if it pissed off the other side, all the better.

You remember the 'Forces of Conservatism' speech, this was the Blairite evangelism; 'You lot, we despise you and we are going to make your life as miserable as possible, and we're going to set up systems by which even if you

take control of government, you will not be able to overturn what we've done.'

Among our friends on the continent, particularly in Brussels and in the Commission – not so much the Council, though that came later. But in the Parliament and the Commission, and the commissioning regions and in the other eight, particularly in Coreper (Committee of Permanent Representatives, EU member state's ambassadors) – and that's where people neglect Coreper as the decision making body of Europe far more than the Council – what you saw was a pretty clear transparency of objectives, aims and possibilities. It was not our continental colleagues who were lying to us; it was governments of both Labour and Tory/coalition stripe. The continental figures were being absolutely upfront about what they were planning and what they wanted

But, because the reportage was so weak, it was not reported. I mean, you will know how small the UK press corps was in Brussels – the accredited press corps in Brussels is vast, second only into the White House, However, the UK involvement at that time had been minimal –you had PA, Geoff Meade, you had a rapid turnaround of junior journalists at *The Telegraph* and *Times*.

People like David Charter stuck for a bit, Bruno Waterfield is still there, and the *FT* – well the *FT* saw itself as a Brussels based newspaper rather than a London based newspaper, and it was known as DGFT.

In 2002, I was doing some consultancy and it was on postal services, so the commissioner was Frits Bolkestein, and I was trying to get in to see him and his aide-de-camp, Dirk Jan Eppink, who later became an ECR MEP.

And Frits was seen as the great free trader, and so I thought well, there's opportunity to talk to him, and Eppink took me aside and said, 'Gawain, if you can get-' and I've forgotten the name of the journalist now, but, '... a named journalist at the *FT* to write a story, then we'll see you. We will not see you unless the *FT* covers your story from your perspective.' That's how much power the *FT* had in Brussels at that point.

UKICE: Sitting in Brussels, what did you make of the Cameron decision to pull the Conservatives out of the EPP? Did you sort of think, 'Oh, that's going to take face away from us,' or, 'That's a tactical error on his part?'

GT: It depends who you are. About eight, nine years earlier I wrote a paper with Lee Rotherham and Emmanuel Bordez for the Centre for Policy Studies, called 'Bloc Tory'. We argued that this is something that they should do, and I'm told it was used as the route map from then on how to do it, so I was delighted. I may have been working for UKIP at the time, but I was happy as Larry, because that was our policy.

But the way they did it was weak. Cameron promised that to Dan Hannan, and that is why Dan swayed a lot of the eurosceptics to back Cameron, rather than David Davis. Cameron took that up as a policy after being persuaded by Hannan, Heaton-Harris, Roger Helmer – the H bloc in Brussels. So that's where that came from. But I think it was done in a ham-fisted fashion, it could have been done far better. However, I would say that, wouldn't I?

So, yes, it depends where you're coming from. If you're trying to have an engaged pro-European but with a slightly British flavour, a slightly in-Europe, not run by Europe style taste to your drink, then it was probably foolish because it left them quite isolated in the pre-meetings to Council.

All the centre-right prime ministers would have their week beforehand in some chateau in France or wherever, and they would settle their policy positions so that the ministers from the various countries would go with a combined ticket to Council. Obviously the Tories were no longer part of that. That being said, it was a pretty close-run thing amongst the Tory group in Brussels. To the extent that the Tory group in Brussels didn't want to do it, even though Cameron made it happen.

And the personal and longstanding relationships between Conservative MEPs and their colleagues in the EPP group as was, and the EPP group as went on, were such that there was as much conversation between the Tory MEPs with our friends on the continent as there ever was with our friends in London. They were by and large – not all, but they were by and large semi-detached, so it wasn't as damaging as it looked like on paper because of the close relationships that had been built up over 20 years. I mean, these were close personal friendships and relationships that had been built up over many years and so they were e still quite good – people like James Elles, Malcolm Harbour, Caroline Jackson; other people of that sort had very strong relationships.

For many years Caroline Jackson was the most powerful Conservative in Europe. Nobody had ever heard of her name in Britain, but as the chairman of the Environment Commission in the European Parliament, she made things happen; she moved things. Nobody in Britain knew her name, but that was the nature of the beast of European politics in Britain at the time. There was no reportage, nobody cared.

When I got that Bloc Tory paper published for the CPS (Centre for Policy Studies), the woman who was running the CPS at the time had been head of John Major's research unit in Number 10 during Maastricht. When I was giving my 30 minutes' pitch it took 20 minutes to explain to her the differences between the Parliament, the Council, the Commission of the Regions and the Commission. I was sitting there thinking, 'And you were running Number 10's policy unit during Maastricht and you don't know the difference between these institutions?'

UKICE: Were you concerned about the future of UKIP when Cameron made his Bloomberg speech? Did you think he had sort of stolen the rug from under your feet?

GT: Not at all. I didn't believe a word of it. His track record was rubbish, and we didn't believe a word of it.

It's just like when Farage basically said, 'Yes, Tony,' at the beginning of Tony Blair's presidency, 'if you manage any of that, I'm going to support you to the hilt.' He didn't at all, and we knew that before we started.

There was no political requirement for Cameron to stick to that; there was no serious attempt at negotiation. We also had our friends in Brussels and in Coreper and things like this, so we did talk to people. We didn't sit in our offices with huge great moats and drawbridges, we were out there talking to people as well. We're quite personable people in most cases.

So, we were not entirely ignorant about what was going on amongst those we disagreed with. In fact, we got on in some ways very well, if not better than some of the Tories with particularly the newer generation in Brussels – before they realised that we really meant it and it was going to happen, which is when the relationships completely collapsed. But at that point, the fact that we were

upfront and honest about what we wanted meant that we could talk honestly, transparently and straightforwardly with people who disagreed with us.

The Tories weren't trusted because they spoke with a forked tongue; they promised one thing and did another. They did one thing and promised another. They pretended to be Eurosceptic, but in Brussels they weren't. And it was people like Klaus Welle who gave me an education on Conservative Party politics when he was the Secretary General of the EPP Group before he became Secretary General of the Parliament, and his knowledge of the history and background and culture of the Conservative Party, and of British politics, was phenomenal and very interesting; he really was very, very clued up, very bright and insightful, more so than the Tory Party were, which I thought was quite funny.

UKICE: Absent the pledge of a referendum by Cameron in 2013, do you think you could have coaxed more MPs to defect than you eventually did?

GT: There were six more on the list.

UKICE: And you're confident they were all lined up?

GT: Oh, at least. If we kept winning by-elections – if we could take Rochester which was, what, 230 on our list of targets, it was a better bet to be with us at that point.

UKICE: And was dividing the Tories a key part of your strategy at the time, or was that just a sort of added extra?

GT: It wasn't a strategic thing to do, it was just it was there. There were some of what are now called red wall seats that were just as interesting; it was just they didn't jump. If Kate Hoey had been sitting in a Eurosceptic northern Labour constituency, that would have been interesting. She wasn't, she was sitting in Vauxhall; that's not so interesting. But you see what I mean. There were plenty of others who were ready to go, but they weren't necessary.

Well, when I say plenty – if we had taken another three seats. If, for example, on the day of the Clacton by-election, Carswell had relented and allowed us to recoil from some of the promises we made him when he defected, then

another £5,000 would have gone up to Manchester and we would've won that seat (Heywood and Middleton) against Labour too.

On the same day, we would've taken the seat off the Tories and off Labour and by God that would have changed things. We just missed it. We just missed it by a couple of hundred votes, and that would have completely changed things.

Because our argument that our votes came as much in many places from Labour, rather than the Tories, was dismissed by virtually all commentators apart from maybe Matthew Goodwin at that point. If we'd won that seat in Manchester – and we were inches away from it – the guys up there were begging, but Carswell had been made a promise that we would basically fund him to the hilt.

We knew he was going to get over 50% of the votes, he knew he was going to win, but he would not relent and would not let us transfer funds and campaign funds up to Manchester. We would have won it without that, if he'd relented.

I think you would've seen the Labour leader vanish a lot earlier. Ed would never have had a stone; he would've gone before the creation of such a divine piece of absurdity. He would have gone. If Labour had lost a seat, if Labour in opposition had lost a seat to UKIP in a by-election, Miliband was a busted flush. In fact they scraped that and kept him on for that much longer, and that would've changed everything.

So we weren't targeting the Tories-qua-Tory; we targeted the Tories because they were there.

UKICE: Interesting. But the Bloomberg speech cost you votes in the 2015 election, didn't it?

GT: It being a Westminster election cost us votes, yes. European elections are a free hit. What really cost us – and it was transparent in various places – what really cost us votes in that election wasn't the Bloomberg speech, it was the Lizard of Oz, Lynton Crosby.

GT: Yes, it was Lynton's basic strategy of, 'You might like cuddly Ed, but

have you seen Nicola?’ And that concentration on the SNP/Labour coalition. We had people turning up who had donated money to us and who had posters in their window, in that last week coming back to the office and saying, ‘I’m sorry, we can’t do this, we are too scared.’ They couldn’t take the money back, but they said, ‘And we’re voting Tory.’

That probably gave the Tories 2% off us at that election. That’s across the board, so in specific constituencies where they targeted and they knew that we were targeting, it was more costly; we’re talking 5%, 6%, and we would have won four or five seats on the back of that.

And frankly, I don’t think a British advisor could have advised the Conservative Party in that way because it’s such a divisive issue, and continues to have had the impact of bigging up Nicola Sturgeon – making her a far bigger beast than she was, making her a far more national, rather than regional figure. I think we’re still suffering from that as a nation.

Crosby had been given a job: get the Tories in. And he succeeded. But as a foreigner, he couldn’t care less about the union, that wasn’t of interest to him, whereas a British Conservative (Conservative and Unionist) advisor would have found that a very hard thing to do. Now, it was brilliant, and it worked – but I would say that was the thing that impacted far more than Bloomberg.

The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Post-election, we have all the preparations for a referendum. Did you expect to win that referendum?

Gawain Towler (GT): Depends which day you’re asking.

UKICE: When did you start to think winning was a serious possibility, then?

GT: October 2015. But I wouldn’t say my confidence was continued and permanent. I think that like many things, it’s like an accordion; it depends how hard the other side is pushing. The more we saw of our enemy, the more we felt confident. I’m serious. I mean, obviously when the Government’s sending 9 million leaflets through everybody’s door, that had a significant impact, particularly on Tory Brexit voters – not so much on Labour Brexit voters, funnily

enough, but it did have a significant impact on Tory Brexit voters, obviously.

So, there was that. When Stuart Rose rather helpfully informed that people might get pay rises after Brexit, 'And this isn't a good thing,' that was quite good of him. When he did that, that was not a bad moment. The fact that day by day, what we were feeling – and you've got to remember, we were only Leave.EU, we weren't Vote Leave, and we were concentrating on those parts that the Heineken that is Michael Gove couldn't reach.

So, we were concentrating on the Labour Leave areas. Not for nothing did Nigel put George Galloway on stage. Even though it pissed off some of our Jewish supporters – and it did – and it pissed off some of the Tory supporters – and it did – we won Bradford, we won various other parts of the north that, shall we say, the other side didn't expect us to do.

UKICE: Did you see Jeremy Corbyn as an asset?

GT: Yes. Because basically he's a Eurosceptic but he got bullied by Hilary Benn. Corbyn, the great – and he may be a leftie, but at least he's honest; he sticks by his principles. Oh, not this time.

But it meant that he could do nothing. He was paralysed because his heart said one thing, but he had made promises to the Labour Party that he wouldn't do the things he believed in. So, he took Labour largely out of the game.

UKICE: Was there anything you were worried about in Cameron's negotiation that you thought might make a difference to the referendum?

GT: He didn't do any negotiation. If he had come back with a bloody withdrawal agreement he'd have won. If he'd come back with the first of the May Chequers deals he'd have won, and that's peanuts anyhow. But he came back with nothing, nothing substantive whatsoever.

And we were pretty convinced that the delay from Vote Leave to act was Michael Gove's doing. Which is why we kicked off and pissed off the Vote Leave crew, because they were all saying, 'Oh no, we can't act until he comes back from his negotiations. And it's like, 'That's gonna finish in May; that gives you one month to campaign for a referendum, you silly idiots.'" But,

because they're all Tory loyalists, 'Oh no, oh no, we can't do anything to upset David.'

And so, in the end that's why we went early because they weren't going to, and we forced them to act earlier, which helped the row between us and Vote Leave.

UKICE: Ultimately, would you accept that Vote Leave ran a good campaign?

GT: Oh, when they started taking our lines in the last two weeks? Yes. Look, it was very early on when the fallout between the two sides happened – I think it's funnily enough on the day when Lord Lawson wrote a piece, I think, in *The Telegraph*, which was less than friendly towards Nigel and us. I bumped into Paul Stephenson that evening, and he literally crossed the road to come to me and apologise for the article.

I've always got on with Paul, but yes, he basically said, 'Look, that was outrageous and out of order.' However, that set the tenor, or at least confirmed the tenor of the relationship between the two sides. Obviously, Dom(inic Cummings) is quite confident of his own abilities, so the relationship was not particularly comfortable either.

I maintained lunch every now and then with Matt Elliott over the period and we're still friends, but that was difficult. It does make us laugh when we see Matt and Dan Hannan and all the rest of it, even today, pretending that Leave.EU didn't exist. It did make us smile. That's the nature of the beast and we understand that's how it works.

But very early on – so November-ish, though I tried in the late summer, in September – when the question was being set and when we were discovering what the franchise was going to be I put this letter together where I got everybody in Vote Leave and Leave.EU to agree that we disliked certain aspects that were being proposed. It was going to be in the *Sunday Telegraph*, everybody had signed up to it, even (Aaron) Banks said he was happy. He had an issue with certain members of the Vote Leave crew, but even he agreed to it. Nigel agreed to it and Gove had agreed to it, and so on and so forth.

So I took my sprogs to the cinema on Saturday afternoon in Clapham Common

at the Picturehouse there, and came out to discover that Cummings had vetoed it. He would not have both sides agree on anything, even something they agreed on. He would not have both sides agree publicly on anything.

Very soon after that I came to the conclusion that this arrangement worked fine. I wasn't at all worried that we didn't get the nomination for funds. I wasn't at all worried at the different messages.

I watched Vote Leave launch their messages, and one of their top three messages is, 'Brexit is going to be great for science'. I thought, 'That's going to go down really well in Hartlepool.' Frankly, 'What?' It might be great in Surrey, but really?

It was obvious that Farage and others in our camp could speak in areas that Gove was never going to get through to, and that the Vote Leave crowd – this was before Boris had done his thing – were not going to be able to reach. So it became quite good. They could say, 'Oh, they're talking about immigration, nothing to do with us, we're good guys, they're dreadful,' and we could say, 'They're blithering idiots who are stuck in the establishment and talking about science and stuff of this sort.'

So, we were able to divide the message – both messages were getting through to the constituent audiences we were trying to get through to. But the Remain side couldn't take pot shots at them because it was us, and vice versa.

UKICE: Does it not frustrate you now that UKIP, Nigel Farage, Leave.EU, you don't get much in the way of credit for the outcome?

GT: You're talking to me now. The people that matter know. I didn't join this campaign and I didn't join this cause because it was going to give me knobs at the end of my name. I joined this cause because I believed in it, and I knew from day one back in 2004 that win or lose, my career was screwed. But I believed in it.

I mean, you just have to look at what's happened – one former MEP is working at Amazon in a service centre – you have to look at what's happened to our people after they put their head above the parapet, after they won the war, after they did everything to make it happen. Which would not have

happened without us.

And Claire (Fox) did not get being nominated for Baroness because of her Brexit policy – it's because of everything else she did, the Institute of Ideas and stuff of that sort. And she's the only one who's been related to Nigel at all ever to be offered anything. We didn't expect things.

I'm still unemployed. I just got how much I'm going to get through this month; I've got to live on £165 after rent. It's not good, it's bloody hard, but we knew that. We knew if you take on the establishment, it's probably better if we'd lost: 'Oh, well done, you gallantly fought the fight. Congratulations. Oh, how British of you, well done, terribly good.' Clap, clap, clap, clap. No, far worse that we actually bloody won. We'll never be forgiven.

UKICE: If you look at the political leadership of Vote Leave and how surprised they looked the day after the referendum, did you get a they actually were fighting to lose, rather than to win?

GT: Yes, yes, absolutely. We were convinced of it. By the end, we were convinced of it. They did not think they were going to win, but they wanted to show that they had been gallant. They wanted to be gallant little Belgium, you know, overrun by the Hunnish Hordes. 'But hey, they put up a good fight for a few weeks.' We wanted to win.

And by May – no, by March, April, we were convinced that was the case. They were pulling their punches in the sense that they refused to do anything until Cameron came back from his negotiation. It wasn't about Europe; it was about the Tory Party.

And even if there were individuals within Vote Leave – and I'm sure there were – who were straight down the line, enough of the power figures within Vote Leave were jockeying for position in a post-Brexit referendum world in the Tory Party. It wasn't about Brexit. Look at Sajid (Javid)'s wonderful essay he wrote on the eve of the referendum, where he made all the arguments for leaving, and then said, 'I'm going to vote to Remain.'

UKICE: Where would you place Boris Johnson?

GT: I think he is a Leaver in his guts. But he takes the main chance, doesn't he? I'm not one of the people who criticises him for writing the two articles; I think that's a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It's a serious debate, and no one side has all the answers. Writing the two articles – one in favour of Remain and one in favour of Leave – is actually very normal if you're faced with a difficult decision, to put down yes and no. And how does he do it? He writes silly articles.

But to put down a list of positives and negatives of both perspectives – that's to me perfectly normal. To make a big song and dance about it? Nah, that's people being as opportunistic as he is.

UKICE: Would it be fair to say that the Conservatives' eventual triumph in the red wall seats can be traced back to your activities during the EU referendum. That's to say you weaned a lot of these people off the official Labour line?

GT: Yes and no. I would say it goes back a bit before – it goes earlier than that. UKIP held all three council wards in Miliband's constituency, in Rosie Winterton's. So the referendum merely supercharged what was happening already. And once you've broken your residual familial habit of voting, it's easier to vote for somebody else.

Farage's decision not to stand against the Tories was the main event of the General Election that just passed. It helped the Lib Dems take the wind out of Labour's sails, saved the Tories about 40 seats. It lost them about 15 seats possibly in some of the northern red wall seats. But overall, if you think what the Lib Dems thought they were going to do in the south west, in Wales, elsewhere, we destroyed their ambitions and made them unviable as a vote.

Change UK had failed to have any impact at all. I still am amused, very amused to see how Change UK is described as a bunch of moderate politicians. Not on the big issue that they were presiding over, they weren't moderate. They were way out there. Less than 1% of the population would support them on that. They may be moderate on virtually everything else, but on Europe they weren't – they were extremists.

So I think, yes, there's no doubt that the combination of what UKIP had done before and what happened in the referendum with Leave.EU, did have a

weaning effect on many people, and made people think 'It's worth giving Boris a punt, at least he's going to give us this.'

British politics, 2016-2018

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Did you expect UKIP to flourish after the referendum?

Gawain Towler (GT): No. I thought we were going to be a busted flush.

UKICE: Is that why Nigel Farage resigned so quickly?

GT: Well, he resigned as leader because he thought he'd done his job. He wanted to go and make money. Of which I didn't begrudge him a penny. I wish I could do the same. But no, even at his resignation speech, he said, 'If you lot screw this up, I'll be back.' And Westminster went, 'Yes, you're a busted flush now, you're done.' Wrong.

Westminster completely dismissed him – 'That's it, he's gone, he's resigned, he's no longer relevant. Blah, we've done this, the referendum has been done, he's irrelevant, ignore him, he's busted.' Well, the Brexit Party proved them wrong.

But he wanted out, he wanted out; he wanted to go away to make some money. It's bloody tiring running a political party, it really is. And the personal and the social shit that he had to go through on a daily basis. It's no fun having security guards around you all the time when you can't even go to a country pub without hoodlums turning over the tables. It's no fun.

One of Farage's quotes is that, 'Well, you go into politics with two things: to be someone or do something.' We went the do something line, and I'm thoroughly proud of what we did. But as I say, I'm still on Universal Credit. So, it's a double-edged sword.

UKICE: Did you find post referendum that Eurosceptic campaigners from across Europe reached out to try and learn the lessons that you had to teach them?

GT: Yes, and no. Yes, certainly that's true, and I'm still in communication with quite a few. I noticed that the French eurosceptic party even uses, 'Take Back Control' as a slogan. OK, it would be in French, but its typeface and its graphic design is straight off the Brexit Party songbook; it's a glorious in fealty to our visual and verbal imagery.

Yes, we do, but obviously the Theresa May mitigate-the-disaster rather than grasp the opportunity approach has resulted in cold feet by most of the more eurosceptic parties. When Britain starts to succeed, then things will change.

UKICE: So, did you expect some sort of domino effect in the immediate aftermath of a UK Yes vote?

GT: Before the vote, possibly. After the vote, and with the failure to activate Article 50 instantly as we were promised, and the failure of the Government to actually do what it was told, and the fact that the Government basically introduced a mitigate disaster approach rather than grasp opportunity approach, no.

UKICE: Activating Article 50 straight away because that obviously puts you into exiting through an EU process. Did you not just think, 'Well, we'll just make preparations to go, and then we send a letter and say, by the way guys, we've gone.'

GT: Yes, it was one of the options. If it we had activated Article 50 immediately, we would have been gone, what, a year and a half ago?

Basically Westminster, even now after the General Election is a Remain building. Then it was what, 80% Remain?

That House – and one feels that it was like the bloody Rump Parliament under Cromwell – that House did not represent the country. That House could not deliver what the country had requested unless it had taken a look in the mirror and realised that it was not doing what it was told. And the habit of democracy amongst our parliamentarians, as I see it – and I am a bit of a sea-green incorruptible on these things – the habit of democracy is not strongly held.

UKICE: One charge is that Leave was very good at articulating a number of

cases against the EU – whether it was controlling migration or money for the NHS – but it actually didn't offer anything that would look like a blueprint for how to leave and what Leave looked like. Do you think that's one of the things that Parliament struggled with afterwards? There was no manifesto for Leave as there would have been in a normal general election.

GT: Oh, absolutely. Quite right too. Nor should there have been. That was the point. It is up to the people of this country to decide how their future is. If you have a referendum to say, 'We give Parliament the power,' then you can't say, 'And by the way, Parliament's going to do this.' The whole point was that once we've got our freedom back, our democracy back, our constitution back and our ability to make decisions, then it's up to the people of the country.

You can't prescribe one possible future when you're basically saying all futures are possible. That was the point, and it didn't harm us.

UKICE: No. You could argue that it allowed you to assemble a sort of inherently non-functional coalition of people who wanted very different things.

GT: I would say that was more what happened with the Brexit Party, where we were able to get Ann Widdecombe and Claire Fox to walk down the corridor together.

Yes, we had one thing, and that was delivering the promise of the referendum. That was it, and we didn't even bother with anything else because the rest of it was something that wasn't our purview; they are Westminster issues, so we didn't bother with Westminster policies because that really wasn't the game.

So, yes, you could argue that we were putting together an impossible coalition of possibly divergent views. But actually, on most of the big-ticket stuff, there's surprising cohesion – more than I would've expected. It was a question that came up quite often, *FT* and Hugo Dixon and other types like this were constantly going, 'But, but, but, but, you don't have a policy; what happens afterwards?' And I was happy and proud to say, 'Quite right too, that's the point.'

UKICE: But then that inevitably throws it back to what you've dismissed as an intrinsically Remainer Parliament that can't decide what the referendum

mandate was.

GT: But I suspect you've got at least two terms, once you've done it, two terms before Parliament settles down. One, it's going to become more interesting to become an MP than it has been in recent years, because what you do matters. I think you'll see a lot more by-elections and a lot more people standing down after one or two terms. Can you achieve what you've set yourself out to, yes or no? No? Alright, leave. Yes? I did it, and I'll leave.

The idea of Westminster politics as a career in itself becomes less important – it's about achieving and doing stuff. In so many parts of our national life whilst we're members of the European Union that is not possible in a Westminster level, that has to be done at a Brussels level.

And so, I think it becomes a much more interesting thing to do, to give back or whatever after a career. If you are passionate about veterans affairs and you want to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant is put into law rather than is given nice words, then that becomes what you get elected on, and that's why you want to get in. Now you have to understand the party structure, that's required and important, but that's really what you're there for. If you succeed, you've done your bit and you can go, and if you fail, well, you did your bit and you did everything you could, and it didn't work.

So I think it will strengthen democracy and I think it will improve things, but I don't think it's going to happen overnight.

UKICE: Were there moments in the Brexit process, sort of following the referendum when you thought Brexit had been lost?

GT: I thought it could be. Post 2017, I really thought it could be lost. I thought the numbers in Westminster were such that it could be lost. We were aware that the Remain campaign team was not functional, but we didn't know quite how dysfunctional it was.

But it must've been October 2018 that I had a beer with Nigel and he said, 'We're going to have to-'. We'd mentioned that as a possibility, and we always knew it was possible we had to do something. But we came to the conclusion in October/November of 2018 that we would have to do something,

because Westminster was going to drop the ball.

Olly (Robbins) was not interested in Brexit. And you've seen the videos of Verhofstadt and the rest of them giggling about how shit we were, and how they've got us over a barrel and so on and so forth. When you've got a negotiating team who actually agrees with the guys on the other side of the table, rather than they do with the people who voted for them, it's impossible. From the approach they had from day one, it was impossible for them to achieve a beneficial, positive Brexit because they didn't believe it was possible. There just was nothing beneficial about Brexit.

The Brexit Party

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Just to get the timeline of the Brexit Party right, were you having those conversations with Nigel Farage before it was certain we would participate in the European elections?

Gawain Towler (GT): Well that would have meant we would've been out on 29 March and that would be fine. But basically 29 March was the crunch point. We came to the conclusion before Christmas, long before Christmas that we were not leaving on 29 March, so we had to be getting ourselves ready, at least getting the mindset ready, start the thinking, start the 'How do we approach this? what do we do if we don't leave on 29 March? There will be a European election, in which case we have to win it.'

UKICE: But when did you start the practical planning to set up a party then? At that meeting, would you say?

GT: No, I didn't. Though it's quite possible Nigel did. I would say that I first got wind of it at the beginning of March. No, end of February. There had been a number of post-UKIP groupsicle parties set up, many of whom had approached Nigel and said, 'Will you support this? Will you support this?' And he had kept everything at an arm's length until the Brexit Party was created. He gave Catherine Blaiklock the nod, unaware that she was a raging loon as well.

So there was her and a guy called Mick McGough who set it up, and she asked Nigel who he advised to be Press Officer. He said use me, and I gave them an

initial contract for £1,000 a-month. Now that was transferred into a wage within two weeks because it was transparent that the amount of work required was going to be significantly more.

Then, I think Pete Walker at *The Guardian* found some rather insalubrious things she'd said, and the same with the Treasurer, Mick, and so I was left in this rather glorious situation of sitting in this tiny little office in a shared space in Victoria Street, having sacked the leader and the treasurer of this putative party, and I was the only person left. I'd sacked the two people who wrote my cheques, which was slightly awkward and embarrassing.

But all that happened was, Nigel was going to take over that party on Date X. Because of the sacking of those two, he had to do it two weeks earlier. So we got rid of them and he had to step up two weeks earlier than the plan. Which was in some ways good because it gave us a bit more time to find the 86 candidates for the European elections that we needed to get, so I'm quite glad we had the extra two weeks.

UKICE: Did you ever think there was any possibility that the EU might say that the UK should be excluded from standing in those European elections on the grounds that we were an exiting member state?

GT: There's no way that legally that would stand. There's no way that legally that would have stood, absolutely no way. If we hadn't left, we were in. And we'd put down parliamentary questions to that effect, I think, beforehand. UKIP had put down parliamentary questions to that effect beforehand, so we knew what the legal position was.

UKICE: Was the decision to not have a manifesto and not have a policy platform a function of the lack of time, or a deliberate decision?

GT: It was an absolute deliberate decision. The only thing that united everybody in the party was a belief in democracy and the belief that the referendum should be respected. Period. That was it.

UKICE: There was no pressure from anyone to try and make it into a longer-term thing?

GT: At that point, no. During the campaign, I think that sort of view of, ‘Do we trust them? No, we don’t, we need to keep this ticking over, over the summer,’ began, because we didn’t know what was going to happen. And when Theresa May went, we still didn’t know.

Everybody says the Boris thing was inevitable; it wasn’t inevitable then; it became inevitable right at the end, but not at the time. Okay, it was never going to be Rory (Stewart), but it wasn’t inevitable until much later in the Tory leadership campaign. There was still the possibility, given the numbers, that you’d have had a Remainer as the leader of the Tory Party. If you had another Remainer as the leader of the Tory Party, then all bets were off. I don’t think the Tories would have won their 80-seat majority in those circumstances, trust me. The red wall would not have fallen.

UKICE: Were you surprised by how easily UKIP died?

GT: No. The only reason UKIP isn’t wholly dead is because there’s legacies. There’s a few members of staff still being paid in a bungalow in Newton Abbott out of dead people, but that’s about it. Once, I tried to help Gerard (Batten) after (Henry) Bolton went, privately. He wasn’t listening. Once you turn a party from something that believes in constitutional change to an explicitly anti-Islamic party, there just aren’t the votes for that. And essentially I don’t know anybody left in the UKIP structure who I would happily have a beer with. He went back and took over and made it very explicit that that’s what he wanted to happen. I think one of their candidates in the European election I still have good communications with and that’s it. One. And that’s after 12, well, 14 years working for them.

UKICE: Was there any talk about disbanding the party after the 2017 general election?

GT: Yes, but at that point you still had Diane James and there was Paul Nuttall and there were some quite solid people. I know it all blew up in their faces – in our faces, but there were some pretty good solid people around, there were still some sound, decent types around and we just didn’t trust the Tories.

Has anybody ever done well out of trusting Boris Johnson, or the Conservative Party who are not fully fledged members and donors of the Conservative

Party?

UKICE: Were you part of the conversations with the Conservatives during the General Election?

GT: Part of, yes.

UKICE: Can you talk us through them a little bit?

GT: I've given my word so I can't really go into it. That was just an understanding, but yes, I spoke to a number of people, particularly on the ERG side, and I set up other meetings with other people.

UKICE: How did your decision to pull candidates go down with those candidates? I mean, did it cause a degree of internal difficulty?

GT: Yes, it hurt. It hurt a lot. I felt a great deal of loyalty to these people; they'd been giving us a hell of a lot of loyalty. And the amount of people who lost their jobs because they stood for us.

UKICE: Do you think it was the right decision?

GT: Yes. But was it an easy one? No. Was it nice? No. Was it necessary? Yes. We had given our word that if certain things happened, we would act, and when Boris did his little video on the Sunday before we made that decision, we were duty bound and honour bound to honour our promise.

And though there were good Labour people we'd like not to have stood against, there were bad Tories we'd loved to have stood against. Though we'd all said we'd stand for country before party, we had all said that and everybody cheered that, when it's yourself in Epping it hurts a bit more.

I'm still on various WhatsApp groups including – they call themselves 'Phoenix' – the former Brexit Party candidates who were forced to stand down. Many of them stood as independents. Not all, but many did, and I'm still very much chatting to them. They're still friends. But at the same time we did let them down.

However, if you'd gone seat by seat to work out whether we should be supporting them or not, the cloudiness of that message would have meant the message didn't get across. And I had people phone me up time and time again, begging us not to stand against Candidate X by Tory MPs.

I think there were four or five of the Brexit Party candidates who did stand down under pressure from the Tories. Having dug into it, I think there were only three.

One, Rupert Lowe, we thought fucked us properly in Dudley. He didn't, he had informed people, but that information hadn't got to the centre so we didn't have time to do anything about it. He said he wasn't going to do it, but he gave us time to replace him. That information didn't come through fast enough, and so we didn't know. So, Nigel's anger with Rupert has gone; he didn't stiff him, as we thought at the time.

There was a guy in Bristol, who – and it was my fault actually, personally – he had sent some messages into a group of which I was on, and he'd sent a message saying that he couldn't give it 100%, so therefore if somebody else wanted it, please do. And I didn't pick up the message and I didn't get somebody to replace him.

And he was absolutely gutted when the nominations closed and he realised that he could only give 60% of his time, he would have happily done so, so that was one of them. That was explicitly my fault, I didn't pick it up.

So, the claims that people were just caving to the Tory pressure, the Tory pressure, was absolutely disgusting. I don't know if you recall it, but Ann Widdecombe being phoned up by people, by Number 10, being told that she would be on a board or a committee of this, that and the other. Mike Greene in Peterborough being told he'd be basically chairman of the Peterborough University campaign.

I don't know if peerages were offered, but I don't think they were. I wasn't privy to that, and I'm not privy to that. But the campaign in The Mail – where people's private emails were put out with the message, 'Lobby these people,' – candidates were getting hundreds and hundreds of abusive messages. This is not how we do politics in this country.

UKICE: Do you think many of those candidates still aspire to a role in politics?

GT: Yes.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): And do you think there's space for a party like UKIP or the Brexit Party now that the Tory Party looks like it does?

Gawain Towler (GT): The amount of messages coming forward, begging Nigel to come back and lead a party. You've got people like Lesley Katon. And we've obviously evangelised a monster in Ben Habib: there he was, a mild mannered plutocrat with property empires in Warsaw and northern England, quietly getting on, almost hitting £1bn in worth, just getting on, making a lot of money, dressing in nice smart suits. And now look at him: chairman of three Eurosceptic thinktanks, this, that and the other. I was like, 'What?' Writing an article every three days for The Telegraph, still making lots of money out his property and somehow, he's made money during the Covid lockdown, I don't know how, but he's a good businessman.

There are people who are very, very keen and active. The Telegraph seems to have become the house journal of the Brexit Party in exile. Any Brexit Party MEP who wants to publish something, it's in The Telegraph, or at least on their online section. Me, for example. Pretty much anybody.

There is a lot of activity; they have been working very closely – there's this organisation Unlocked that has come out of it. This Phoenix Group. I think there's a recognition that we woke up an awful lot of people who weren't involved in politics and for what they saw as a good cause.

Now, they have differing, other interests; there's one group in Carshalton whose other interest is mostly about the Carshalton Hospital and roads in the locality. But if you've evangelised somebody on a big-ticket issue and they enjoy it and they find it's worthwhile then that energy, and that feeling of you know what, 'I can do things,' has meant that they're much more active in local politics and things of this sort.

There's a lot of people out there that we have, as I say, evangelised into

activism, and they're still talking. Where's my phone? While we've been talking, how many messages have come in through these various WhatsApp groups? Forty-five. And these are all former Brexit Party candidates talking to each other.

UKICE: So, what substantive issues are motivating them, given the nature of the Government we have?

GT: Many people thought this was going to be a Conservative Party, and they feel that the Covid response has not been. Things like the Boris, 'Oh shit, I'm too fat, everybody else has got to stop being fat too,' and this sort of nanny state-ism.

Very early on the Brexit Party groups were saying, 'Sweden' over Covid. Then you've got the people outside of things like John Longworth, who obviously went back to the Tories, but they have been quite strong in their message of 'We've got to get the country working, otherwise we're screwed.'

And they're still quite strongly associated with pieces like Briefings for Brexit; you've got Brian Monteith who's doing his think tank stuff; they are following negotiations very closely. And the fisheries people are still banging on about fisheries and so on and so forth. There's quite a lot of activity.

Is there space for a party? Yes, there certainly is. I doubt very much it's going to be Nigel; it's going to have to grow its own leadership. He's not completely ruled it out, but again he wants to go away and earn some money too. I think the response to things like Black Lives Matter, the response to Covid, this growing nanny state-ism, it just doesn't feel right. The Northern Ireland situation is also exercising quite a few people.

UKICE: In what way?

GT: How, despite promises by the Government on Northern Ireland, if we continue the way we're going, that Frost is going and all the rest are going, Northern Ireland going to stay part of the EU to all intents and purposes.

UKICE: But you knew that when you saw the Northern Ireland protocol.

GT: Yes, I know. We did, we did, but the Tory Party seemed to believe otherwise.

UKICE: Then you facilitated the Tory Party getting the majority...

GT: Yes, better that than the chance of a Corbyn Government and a Remain House with a Remain leadership.

UKICE: So, you went in with your eyes open in terms of the Protocol?

GT: Yes, we knew that, but what was our choice?

UKICE: Some of the ERG now say they were told that they were OK to vote for this withdrawal deal with its flaws because actually the Government wouldn't be bound by it afterwards?

GT: Listen to what Steve Baker would say after the election. Extraordinary. Yes. And in fact, the conversations I had at the time before the election, yes, definitely. Some figures, quite loud and public figures in the ERG who are now beginning to think that they should've been a little bit more forthright at the time.

UKICE: But you guys must've knew signing a treaty means you cannot do that.

GT: But at the same time, politics is the art of the possible, isn't it? We were made promises that we knew they couldn't keep, but at the same time, they were better than many of the other options that were possible.

It does mean that I can text people and take the piss out of them. And so, if it wasn't for lockdown, I'd be in the pub taking the piss out of them, but right now it's just texting them and taking the piss out of them for being so gullible about certain things. We went into it with our eyes open, but the choice was stark. If we hadn't done that, the Lib Dems could easily have picked up 40 seats in the south west and elsewhere.

UKICE: We saw those polls of Conservative members saying that quite a few of them regarded the break up of their union with Scotland is a price worth

paying for Brexit.

GT: Yes, I've seen that, but I think they're wrong.

UKICE: Is that where your supporters are as well?

GT: Some, some. The sort of people that came out for UKIP during the Paul Nuttall English Nationalist, English parliament approach. I'm not one of them, but certainly there are some. I got my TA commission in Scottish Regiment after six years in Glasgow. Cut me and I bleed orange, in that sense. I am a unionist, but just not a European unionist. And obviously, Nigel's been very close to the DUP for many years, so you know where he's coming from.

So, I mean, there are definitely those within the Brexit Party firmaments who are, 'Oh, sod the union, what have the Scots done for us anyhow?' But they are very few. Much more in the old UKIP Party than there are in the Brexit Party. UKIP became quite an English nationalist party. The Brexit Party isn't. There were one or two, but no. The impact in Wales, for example. I mean, the Brexit Party could still, despite the fact it's almost in abeyance, pick up seats in the Welsh Assembly elections.

UKICE: For you was leaving the European Union an end in itself, primarily, or a means to an end?

GT: It is part of a broader political philosophy. I have a personal animus against bureaucracy. In fact, I find it really hard to fill in forms just as a matter of course.

I'm a democrat. I will accept governance by the Labour Party of this country, even though I disagree with their policies, because it is a Government that has been voted by the people of my country with whom I share a great deal, even if I don't share their political agreement. I consent to be governed by the people of this country, even if they disagree with me. I do not consent to be governed by people of which I share virtually nothing.

UKICE: So, it's a procedural and philosophical thing? It's not specific policy things that you saw as coming out of Brexit?

GT: Not really, no, because I'm a constitutionalist in that sense. It is very much a constitutional issue. Yes, I do believe that migration is a clusterfuck. Yes, I do believe in certain other things. I think the subsidies regime and, in many cases, the environmental policies coming out of Brussels, are, I think, unstuck. However, it's the constitution that matters.

What would I be arguing about? Well, I suppose, say Brexit was done and I still wanted to be involved in politics in any way, the freedom of speech issue is the only other thing that could grab me. And again, that's quite a theoretical thing.

UKICE: When you say, 'Say that Brexit was done.' When will you consider it done?

GT: One hopes next year, eh?

UKICE: So, leaving transition?

GT: If we finish transition and we're out, yes. Well, to my mind, the key is judicial independence. Everything else, once you've got judicial independence, incrementally will change.

Sooner or later the Supreme Court will go, rather than being pro-European, will go, 'Hold on, we'll actually be a Supreme Court. Oh, that will be fun, we're in charge. We don't have to bow down to Brussels on Strasbourg decisions.'

And that belief in the importance of the power of sovereignty and independence in a judicial sense will slowly- I mean, when we leave on, say we leave at the end of this transition period and there's no extension, in a legislative way, we won't be any different at all, at least for a day, and any changes will be marginal and slow from a legal perspective.

They will happen, but they will happen over time and they will be slow. I'm perfectly happy with that. I'm not a revolutionary, I don't expect things to happen overnight, but I think, as I was talking about it, it's at least two terms of Parliament before I really start to see how things improve, but I think they will improve.

I'm very much influenced in my thinking on this by the Reverend Sydney Smith

who wrote a superb essay just before the Great Reform Bill in the Edinburgh Review about how partisans of the Reform Bill were overestimating its immediate impact – schoolboys that think that homework will be abolished, old maids will think themselves get married, so on and so. It's not going to solve all our problems, but it is a better place than we were before.

UKICE: When you talk about judicial independence, do you mean as much from our own politicians as from the European Union?

GT: I'm not a great fan of judicial activism, so not so much. No, it's from the ECJ. I hate the Supreme Court, but that's what we've got now. I think it's a deeply alien institution, however that's what we've got now, and maybe they'll be good.

UKICE: What would be the big thing you'd like to see parliament do now we've taken back control? is there anything that you would think, yes actually that's a decent payback to the people we persuaded to vote for Brexit, even though there might be a short term economic disruption, or whatever?

GT: Well, it's inevitable in some way. And always was. It always was. It's not a quick fix, it's not the world is suddenly perfect.

However, freedom is hard. Liberty is difficult, but it's a darn sight better than the other option, and I'm very happy. If I could afford a garden, I'd go off and clip my roses, but I probably wouldn't do it in a Black Lives Matter fashion. I wouldn't be tearing down any statues while I clip the roses, put it that way.

So, I think we've got to grow up a bit. I think I'd like to see Westminster be more honest with itself and the people it purports to govern. But I believe that will happen over time. I'm an optimist.