James Schneider

Co-founder of Momentum
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The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): How engaged was Momentum with the referendum campaign in 2016?

James Schneider (JS): Initially, we didn't have a position on the referendum and weren't doing anything, but myself and some others thought that was a completely unsustainable position. We suspected that the overwhelming bulk of our members and supporters would want us to campaign for Remain. So, we conducted an internal poll and found that this was the case, with around 80% wanting us to campaign for Remain, and used that as our reasoning with the Steering Committee to shift into campaigning for Remain.

Then, very quickly, we began working with Another Europe is Possible, who moved into Momentum's offices. We worked together closely on canvassing, we did some stunts, and had some involvement with the disastrous 'Battle of the Thames'.

I wasn't on a boat. I was on a bridge, but others were on boats. It was quite a bad moment. When there's Bob Geldof giving two fingers to fishermen, it''s like that Mitchell and Webb sketch where they ask: 'Are we the baddies?' Is Bob Geldof and a bunch of poshos on his big boat, telling fishermen to get fucked, really good? No, probably not. It was quite a bad day and felt like we were losing. Then the next day Jo Cox was killed.

UKICE: Did you have any other reservations about the way Labour approached the whole referendum campaign?

JS: I thought the main Labour campaign – the Alan Johnson, Hilary Benn one – was very limp, and quite establishment, and, therefore not terribly effective. I do think that if Jeremy's 'remain and reform' message – not necessarily the idea that people get super excited about reforms in the EU, but one which is a more Euro-critical Remain position – had been more foregrounded, I think there is a cohort of voters that went for Leave that could have been brought over to Remain. Rather than the 'Project Fearism' of George Osborne and David Cameron.

Or the, 'Isn't the EU lovely, because university students can sometimes do a term abroad?' ,which seemed to be a lot of what the argument from the official Labour campaign was. Yes, I'm being slightly unfair in that characterisation, but in that direction.

Also, I didn't have tremendous insight into it, but clearly the co-ordination between the Labour campaign, the Corbyn campaign within the Labour campaign, and 'Stronger In', was not fantastic, it didn't seem.

To be honest, we, Momentum, found it quite easy to engage. Once Number 10 and 'Stronger In' started panicking, and, therefore, suddenly thought, 'Turnout is not going to be good, and young people aren't going to turn out in sufficient numbers, and we don't really have the left on board', and all the rest of it, they then wanted to engage with Momentum. But that was quite a low bar level of engagement for them. We were broadly deniable and doing on the ground mobilising, not having any input on the national message, which is where the disagreements between 'Stronger In' and Corbyn would have been. You could see from the outside that that co-ordination was not working terribly well, which probably comes down to both wanting to pursue different messages and the 'Stronger In' view that Corbyn would just do whatever Benn/Johnson told him to do, which is of course a nonsense.

UKICE: There have been a lot of accusations that Jeremy Corbyn himself could and should have campaigned more effectively, that subsequent elections showed what he was capable of when he put his heart and soul into something. Do you think there's any truth in those accusations?

JS: No, I think it's a load of nonsense, for a number of reasons. First, he did more events and travelled more miles than any other Remain politician, by some distance. It's not like Jeremy is this amazing actor, performer, who can just turn it on for whatever. Jeremy is a supporter of a social Europe and critical of a market Europe, which is a consistent and, in my view, a good position.

But the lines that the (Alan) Johnson campaign and the 'Stronger In' campaign wanted Jeremy to say, he wouldn't have been able to say in any convincing way whatsoever, because that's not what he believes. That's not saying that he wanted to leave. Far from it: he wanted to remain, and he convinced more 'Lexit-y' people to vote for Remain. So, no, I don't think that's the case.

Then there's a lot of the stuff to do with sabotage, that is basically assuming that 'We'll just pop Corbyn in the grid for this day, and he'll just say the thing that we want him to say, and that's that'. Obviously, it didn't work like that, so, no, I think that's all bogus.

Actually, if more of the strategy had been in the direction of 'remain and reform' – you'd have to develop an entirely new language for it, but a more Euro-critical Remain position, which was more Corbyn's position. That would have been more effective with swing Leave-Remain voters, I think.

UKICE: When it came to the subsequent leadership challenge, was there any sense that the membership's views on Brexit might be a problem for Corbyn?

JS: The vote had just happened, so even though the majority of the membership were unhappy that we lost the referendum, of course, the idea that it wasn't going to happen was such a marginal concern.

Owen Smith didn't argue that we should stop Brexit in that leadership campaign. He eventually argued that we should re-join the EU – and therefore join the Euro – at a future date, so that's the world in which we were in. The 'Stop Brexit' train only really started running in 2018 and then was turbocharged by us not leaving the EU in March 2019, but, following the referendum, there were a lot of compliant Remainers.

Joining the Leader's Office, 2016-2017

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You joined Jeremy Corbyn's office in October 2016. Was there a plan to deal with Brexit, or was the tactic to be reactive and base it on whatever the Government decided to do?

James Schneider (JS): There was one part, which was, 'It's for the Government to now say what Brexit is going to be. Let's judge them on that'. There was also a substantial internal battle, which came to the culmination with the Article 50 vote, on how to communicate that the party accepts the result of the referendum.

That was more significant at that stage than what the Government did, because the Government actually didn't do anything. Nothing happened for quite a long time, and the Government didn't want to have a meaningful vote or scrutiny through Parliament. There was the Supreme Court case and all of that stuff in the autumn of 2016. So, yes, I suppose there was a degree of 'wait and see', but also there was some trying out of different approaches.

I think there's a fundamental tension between two possible coherent Labour positions on Brexit. The first position is, 'We are democrats. The EU is not that amazing anyway, so let's find a progressive way to leave'. The second is to say, 'Brexit is really bad. Let's limit the damage of it, and, if possible, stop it'. Both of those are perfectly coherent positions, but obviously they don't really jive with each other at all.

I suppose there were different efforts of trying out one or the other. So, pushes to tie us into the Single Market, customs union, which, let's say, Emily Thornberry was pushing for in autumn 2016, is the latter approach. But then John McDonnell gave a speech in November 2016 where he said, 'We need to seize the opportunities of Brexit'.

Then there were different efforts to define Brexit. I remember one of the first things I did in October 2016 was try to work on some framing language for what we call the 'Tories' Brexit'. Yes, basically, how do we turn Brexit away from being Brexit: Yes/No, to being this Brexit or that Brexit, Tory Brexit or Labour Brexit, 'bankers' Brexit or 'jobs first' Brexit.

The first thing we got for a while, as a kind of holding pattern, was that theirs would be chaotic Brexit. We weren't against Brexit full stop. We were against

the chaotic version that they were pursuing. Then the different types were tried. John McDonnell once spoke about a ‘workers’ Brexit versus the bankers’ Brexit’ – and eventually that ended up with ‘jobs first’ Brexit.

UKICE: Do you remember how you and the Leader of the Opposition reacted to Theresa May’s conference speech that October? Because that was a bit of a pivotal moment and took many people by surprise.

JS: I think we thought that she was making a rod for her own back, really, but I was more interested in other aspects of her speech, which I thought were pretty impressive from their point of view.

I was in the Momentum office, watching that speech. I remember because that speech had a lot to do with meritocracy, and fairness versus equality, and the framing of grammar schools.

She had only done one thing, which was the ‘Burning injustices on Downing Street’ thing. This was something that was putting flesh on it, and in shorthand it was Nick Timothy-ish type stuff. I remember thinking it was very effective and very dangerous, and I was more focused on that than the narrowly EU-focused part.

Then there was also the stuff about ‘citizens of nowhere’, which again I thought, from their point of view, was extremely clever politics, and the stuff about foreign doctors and all of that. Because if you zoomed out from conference, which is what the overwhelming majority of people are, all you’ll see is the Tories are having a row to do with migration, which was what they wanted. Theresa May wanted to show that she was doing something on that issue, and that’s what they got out of it.

Then, of course, they briefed *The Guardian* two weeks later: ‘The special doctor visa thing, we’re not going to do. Obviously, that’s stupid.’ People who follow politics closely see that, but most people who don’t, and don’t read *The Guardian,* won’t see that.

Yes, so my memories are more focused on the political threat of May and Mayism, which I think were potentially substantial, than the red lines, which did seem to be that she was making a rod for her own back a bit with respect to

the EU, but she was building support and was gaining in the polls from that.

UKICE: Talking about ‘jobs first’ Brexit’, in that speech she sets out conditions that mean that the UK is going to probably struggle to stay in the Single Market, and will not stay in the customs union. Did you see this as opening up a big political opportunity, or did you think ‘actually, she’s going to take this country in a direction that is going to be really problematic for the future economy’?

JS: My fundamental problem and, I think, the second fundamental challenge that Brexit presents to Labour and socialist politics, is that it presents the EU as either good or bad. If you’re for Brexit, then getting as far away from the EU is good. If you’re against Brexit, staying as close to the EU as possible is good. When actually, from a progressive point of view, that’s absolute nonsense.

From a left perspective, you want as much distance as you can possibly get from the neoliberal or ordoliberal rules within the EU. You want to get away from von Mises’ and Hayek’s catallaxy, but conversely, you want to be as close as possible to high-quality labour, food safety, environmental standards, cultural exchange, the ability to negotiate together as a global block, all of that kind of stuff.

I think that the challenge was always, how do you split that open? We never really managed to, and it was also quite challenging to because much of the media, who didn’t really understand Brexit before the referendum and were slightly taken aback by the vote to leave, then wanted to view everything as either more Leave-y or more Remain-y.

The customs union makes you more Remain. Not wanting a customs union makes you more Leave. Rather than, what would a progressive, or a reactionary, or a conservative, or liberal, or socialist, or whatever terms you want, trade policy be?

The 2017 general election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): In the run-up to that election, did you suspect that Theresa May was going to be a more effective opponent than she turned out to be?

James Schneider (JS): She was much worse than anybody thought she would be. I don't think we rated her quite as highly as the front-page client journalism that she received. She wasn't this political superhero, Margaret Thatcher reincarnated but on steroids, but their campaign was particularly bad, and she was particularly bad within it.

You can compare – of course, the timings are different, and there are other contingent factors – but basically Johnsonism and Mayism, in many ways, are extremely similar. Johnson and Cummings are, in many ways, just doing what Nick Timothy wanted to do, but effectively.

It's targeting the same voters. It is trying to find a way to overcome the crisis of neoliberalism through a small hit to smallholders of capital, with some state intervention to regionalise the economy a bit more and to pick some winners in some sectors. Or pick sectors that you want to be winners to receive more state support, and couple it with more robust social conservatism.

That's the basic structure of what May was trying to do, with a very boiled-down campaign slogan which you repeat endlessly. They just didn't do it very well. Johnson did it well, and there were some other significant contingent factors.

UKICE: Did you expect Brexit to play more of a role than it did in the 2017 general election?

JS: Our challenge was to make it not. I remember I drafted Jeremy's first statement when the election was called and we were talking through what to say in the first pool clip. For us, we had to say, 'It wasn't a Brexit election.' Instead, it was going to be about all this other stuff.

Sky started the campaign calling it a 'Brexit Election'. Whenever it had a constituency, it didn't show them in red or blue. It showed them in blue or yellow, for these apparently crucial social categories of Leaver and Remainer, but we managed to change what the election was about.

It wasn't a question of 'Did I think that that would or wouldn't be the case'? It was, if we were going to do well, it would involve making the election not about Brexit. If we were going to do badly, the election would be about Brexit.

UKICE: Nevertheless, did you come to the conclusion, post-election, that Brexit helped you in some ways as much as it harmed you, or helped you in some places as much as it harmed you?

JS: No. Brexit pushed some Tory Remainers away from the Tories in some places that would have benefited us, but it also pulled some people who had voted Labour in 2015 towards the Tories in other places. We lost six seats, and those six seats where we lost were heavily Leave voting and we lost them, in large part, because of Brexit.

I think it's more that their campaign was only about Brexit. Then it didn't become the issue, so it fell apart. 'Strong and stable leadership for Brexit', basically, and 'Jeremy Corbyn will be naked in the negotiating room', or whatever weird thing that Theresa May said. It basically wasn't the main game in town in that election, and that benefited us, but we had to make that so.

The evolution of Labour's Brexit position, June 2017-December 2018

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Immediately after the election, did you have conversations about what the Brexit policy might be if Theresa May were to reach out to you about trying some kind of cross-party approach, given her lack of majority?

James Schneider (JS): We did, sort of, make the offer. Some people thought that was absolutely the thing that we should do, and those sorts of offers then got occasionally made, but not terribly followed through on. In Jeremy's 2018 conference speech, where there was an offer made to work together with May if she has a customs union and guaranteed workers' rights. But she never seemed interested in it at all.

You can see that with working with the DUP, so I don't think it was particularly a starter then. If she had approached us, it would have caused interesting tensions within our camp. I think the right thing to do would have been to take her up on the offer, personally, but many people would have argued that 'this is their mess. Let them own it'. But both for the country, to achieve a better and more unified version of Brexit and for Labour to overcome the fundamental

challenge of how Brexit split our potential voter constituency, that would have been better. It just wasn't that realistic an option.

UKICE: Was your working assumption that the Conservative Government wouldn't last that long?

JS: Yes, basically, or that there was a quite good chance it wouldn't, that it was quite unstable. I think we overestimated that.

They did look incredibly weak. There was the stuff about the 44 letters going in all the time. Grenfell happened straight after the election. They didn't have a good summer. They had that appalling conference, Theresa May being handed the P45, and the letters falling off the display – I remember that one. I was in the office for that one and thinking I'd entered an alternate reality. So, yes, I think we thought there was a chance the Government could fall apart, although it wasn't quite clear.

Then that probably did over-determine our strategy, and our strategy to do with Brexit. Because we thought 'Maybe we can bring down the Government in some way, so we need to help construct the maximal coalition against May's deal so that it can spread comfortably from Jacob Rees-Mogg to Caroline Lucas'. Possibly, in hindsight, that wasn't the right idea. The right idea would have been for the Government to fall after some form of Brexit.

UKICE: At that point in June 2017, could Labour have said, 'We're not going to have another referendum'? Was that, in a sense, a missed opportunity to rule out a referendum when you had the ability to within the party?

JS: Yes and no. If we'd had a firmer position – that 'Respect the referendum,' pro-democracy position – and if we'd broadened that pro-democracy argument into a broader argument about democratising society, politics and the economy, that would have tied it in more firmly, and would have made it more difficult for us to move off track.

That all being said, a second referendum was ruled out by every Labour frontbench person in 2017 and in 2018. There's clip, after clip, after clip of Keir (Starmer), Emily (Thornberry), John (McDonnell), Jeremy, Diane (Abbott), all of them, all saying, 'No, not a second referendum. We respect the result of the

referendum.' So, it's not that Labour sat there saying, 'Yes, maybe we'll stop Brexit, maybe we won't stop Brexit. Maybe we'll do a Lexit. Maybe we'll do a BRINO. Who knows? It's all too difficult. We'll just do this so-called constructive ambiguity', which was never our phrase. It was that conditions changed.

Actually, I think the failure is two-fold. One is to not build a democracy argument, because that would have been useful politically for a broader range of things, not just on Brexit. Secondly, to not develop within the party a 'respect the referendum' or pro-democracy type pressure group early on, to balance against the well-funded weight of push-polling and all the rest of it for the continuity 'remain' organisations.

UKICE: In terms of the actual position that Labour was adopting, you had formal support for a customs union, and then ambiguous language about a strong relationship *with* the Single Market, which didn't seem to be *in* the Single Market. Maybe without restrictions on state aid, maybe without freedom of movement. What exactly did you think Labour's position looked like, and what was the rationale for formally going for the customs union and being a bit more ambiguous on the Single Market?

JS: It was a balance between those two potential Labour approaches to Brexit I laid out at the beginning: the 'Brexit is happening, let's find the progressive way to do it' version, and the, 'Brexit is terrible, let's try to limit the damage' version. There's a balance between those things.

If you look at that package in that Coventry speech, which I think you're referring to. A strong relationship with the Single Market, yes, that doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it's saying that we'll have our own bespoke arrangement with the Single Market. So, we're not going to go for exactly Norway, but the aim is to have the same benefits in terms of frictionless trade and the internal market. That's, sort of, what that meant.

The customs union bit was to deal with the issue of the border in Northern Ireland, and to basically guarantee the same terms for British manufacturing to the EU. Also, because the left's case for not being in the customs union, for which there is a very good one, was not one that was understood at all by Keir and is not one that was popular – not as in it was unpopular, but that it wasn't

known within much of the labour movement. So, there wasn't really a policy alternative.

A couple of options were worked up as different alternatives. How could you capture some of the policy space between WTO and customs union rules without opening up opportunities for trade arbitrage – that wouldn't undermine the EU and therefore damage the border in Northern Ireland? But basically customs union was the lowest common denominator, the easiest position to have. It deals with Northern Ireland, trade unions want it, it makes manufacturing easy, plus, it already exists. So, the only difference is we'd say, 'It's a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union with a UK say on future trade deals', because technically that is what it would be.

Then there's the third element, which is the greatly restricted but still-there addendum, which says, 'We would also seek to negotiate protections, clarifications or exemptions where necessary in relation to privatisation and public service competition directives state aid and procurement rules and the posted workers directive. We cannot be held back inside or outside the EU from taking the steps we need to support cutting edge industries and local business, stop the tide of privatisation and outsourcing or from preventing employers being able to import cheap agency labour to undercut existing pay and conditions.'

That fills in a bit what the strong relationship with the Single Market is, because you're basically saying, 'Look, we need a rider that says, 'we can have public ownership of buses and we can have a national, publicly owned mail monopoly', you're not going to screw us over on trains,' and so on and so forth.

Actually, that was more fleshed out about two or three weeks later in a better passage, in terms of politics, and also language. In a speech to Scottish Labour's conference from Jeremy, which basically said, 'We want powers to expand public services and upgrade the economy'. That's a more user-friendly way of talking about enforced competition rules and state aid rules.

UKICE: Substantively, when you saw the Chequers proposals and then the May Withdrawal Agreement, did that basically give you most of what you wanted? Did Labour ever think, 'Actually this Chequers thing looks like quite a

positive way forward and we ought to back it.'

JS: No, I don't think so, because the main things that we were after were the things that are in these six tests. Basically it didn't have dynamic alignment on workers' rights, environmental protections, food safety standards, the stuff that we like.

So we weren't going to go for it, for those reasons. But it was basically, let's face it, a political thing. The one thing that both potential strategies on Brexit – either the pro-democracy, more Lexit-leaning one or the BRINO/'Stop Brexit' one – can both agree on is, 'We don't like this deal'. Because if you come from a left perspective, it's not a progressive deal. It isn't getting the left stuff that you could get out of Brexit so that you can say 'there are left reasons for opposing it'. If you're basically pro-EU, so you want BRINO or 'Stop Brexit', you're like, 'Well, it's not BRINO-y enough'.

Actually, as it turns out, it was quite a good BRINO option. But that's with hindsight and with the political balance and the political realities having been different. I think it would have been very difficult for anybody to have argued internally, saying, 'Look, we don't like this deal on pro-EU grounds. We don't like it on socialist grounds, but God, this thing is an absolute mess. If we could just get it over the line and done with, then maybe we could all move on with our lives'.

Maybe that could have happened if the more, 'respect the referendum', more progressive Brexit people had had greater weight, because you might have thought to do that. We weren't going to argue that in the face of the overwhelming mass of the Shadow Cabinet, actually not the overwhelming mass of the Shadow Cabinet but the balance of forces in the party, being firmly on the BRINO-ish side. You're not going to then say, 'actually, here you go. This is your BRINO'.

UKICE: Were you in touch with people in Brussels at all as you formulated your positions?

JS: Yes, so Jeremy's Brexit advisor was in touch with Brussels a lot. Then there were also trips to Brussels, and meetings with (Michel) Barnier, and Sabine Weyand and all the crew.

And the Irish. Can't forget the Irish, they were always keen to talk. Simon Coveney always very keen to talk to Keir. That Changed Keir's position on the backstop pretty fundamentally. It's always an interesting one: what were the first things that Keir said about the backstop, and then what does he say after the Irish kick off about it?

UKICE: Who were the main figures in the Shadow Cabinet on both sides of the debate?

JS: People also moved position, because remember Tom Watson discovered that the heart, and soul, and beating spirit of not just the labour movement, not just socialism, but all that is right and good in the world, runs through Brussels. Which was an interesting development for him, having attacked the Lib Dems for being Brexit deniers for wanting a second referendum. Also not previously particularly caring about the EU and being from a constituency that's over two-thirds Leave voting.

But Owen Smith was a committed pro-European Remainer and would argue for that position, always. Emily (Thornberry) was in that camp, but her position was not for another referendum and was not to stop Brexit. Her line was always, 'I'm a democrat, but the vote was 52-48, so we need to find a compromise, but to leave'.

It was still to leave, but it was basically, in the parlance, 'a soft but a BRINO-ish Brexit', and so would argue against the attempt to make it a 'workers' Brexit versus a bankers' Brexit'. Obviously, Keir was in a similar-ish position to Emily but in a less stated way, a more technical, lawyerly way.

On the other side, there weren't that many. That's where Jeremy's sympathies were definitely, on the democracy side. John Mac (McDonnell), for a bit, was on a 'Let's try a Lexit-leaning, pro-democracy, get the best out of Brexit' type position, but he moved off that very quickly. Jon Trickett was very much in that position.

Then later on, as it developed, basically MPs in more northern Leave seats – whether they were part of the Brexit process, really, or not – moved more into that position. So, John Healey, Ian Lavery, Richard Burgon, Laura Pidcock, Andrew Gwynne, Angela Rayner. Basically, the MPs whose constituents were

telling them that ‘We want Labour’s social democratic policies, and we want them outside the EU, please, thank you very much’ were more on that side, but less in the technicalia of it and more in the basic political posture.

People's Vote, Change UK and the Liberal Democrats

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): What was your view when you were sitting in the Leader of the Opposition’s office and you see the start and then the gathering of the People’s Vote campaign?

James Schneider (JS): It was ghastly. It was absolutely awful. It was like being stuck on a train line and there’s a train racing towards you. It was just so plainly electoral suicide. It was so obviously a stupid, stupid policy, from both the perspective of the Labour Party and from the perspective of the so-called Remain-leaning people.

Chuka Umunna should have stuck with his pro-Single Market position and not gone for the second referendum because we could have, maybe, got that. Labour’s position almost did formally move to a Norway Plus thing. We could have maybe got something like that through, and that’s what we would have now.

Actually, then there would be a leadership challenge in the Tory Party. There would be a general election afterwards. Maybe we would be in power. It was awful seeing it, because it wasn’t going to work on its own terms. It was sucking up all our time. It was stopping us being able to talk about anything we wanted.

If they won, it would be electorally calamitous for us, and also it was based on an absolute fraud. I mean, just from having some interest in social science, it’s based on the systematic undermining of any social scientific basis for evaluating public attitudes towards Brexit, because it spent millions and millions of pounds on push-polling and then didn’t release all the polls that didn’t show the things it wanted to do.

Basically, I loathed it, but of course not all of its supporters, many of whom were very decent people who had the misfortune to be led by shysters. I could just see it rumbling on, and getting more and more powerful, coming towards

you like a… I don't know, insert a painful analogy here.

UKICE: If it's so obviously a disaster area and potentially so dangerous for Labour, why did your views have so little traction? Or maybe you did, and were seeing off growing Labour support for it on the backbenches?

JS: Yes, so there's a combination of factors there, I think. The first is the existing balance of forces within the party. There is a strong, pro-EU bit of the party. There's not a strong anti-EU bit of the party. Most people don't actually care about the European Union, let's be honest, but that was already there. There was already a well-organised, developed constituency for whom the EU is their socialism, who are hugely over represented in the PLP. That's part of it.

Part of it was just bad faith. The fact that it was bad for us was what drove some people forward. The fact that it finally gave a moral purpose to anti-socialism within the Labour Party because of the absolute catastrophic, disastrous, nation-destroying cataclysm that Brexit will be, as we're discovering 11 days into it. We aren't getting any medicines, Kent is a complete lorry park, law and order has broken down, and the whole world has basically collapsed. Every household is £4,500 worse off, and we're having a special austerity budget, whatever.

Sorry, I'm being overly cynical about this. But, to be less histrionic, there are other concrete reasons. For example, one is that almost nobody under the age of 40, maybe 50, has heard any Euro-critical arguments that aren't from a right-wing, Little Englander perspective in their lifetimes. You can understand why a big bulk of the party's membership who are younger, progressive, urban, hard-core anti-racist and so on, would get attached to the idea that Brexit is bad. That it represents necessarily this terrible force of reaction, rather than a changing institutional arrangement that has become a semi-floating signifier used by the right, which we could move off in some way.

It was those kinds of combination of factors which meant we weren't able to. But we also did hold it off in some cases, and there were also failings we made. We didn't take the argument head-on, which we should have done.

We could have had a special conference in 2018 when we saw the writing on

the wall with the motions that were going through CLP branches in the early summer. Or we could have taken the fight to conference floor and have a split motion at the compositing meeting, although the problem there is that you're basically in a conflict with your Shadow Brexit Secretary then, which would have been a very difficult position to be in.

Keir had a lot of credibility with a lot of parts of the expert-land in parts of the liberal end of the establishment that we didn't have. So, there would have been a lot of downside to that to go with it, but we were able to hold firm sometimes.

I remember in December, going into Christmas 2018, being really profoundly depressed by the situation, thinking we were just going to flop into full PV-ism at the beginning of January. We hadn't been able to force a general election. Keir was saying in meetings 'We need to move swiftly through the gears of the conference motion to get to a public vote' i.e. a second referendum, a 'Stop Brexit' referendum, now.

Actually, we came back in January and pulled together this plan, which was, 'We're going to find a way forward, and we're going to host these meetings with business groups, trade unions, the Norway-plus group of MPs, (Oliver) Letwin and co. We're going to turn these into little process stories for the lobby because there's knack-all going on, but the only thing their editors want them to write about is Brexit'. Let's fill that gap with stories that aren't 'Here's the latest push-poll from Baldwin'.

That went quite well. The meetings we ended up having with Letwin and so on, the Norway-plus people, were good. We had to have some meetings with the PV people as well, but that was to be expected, but some of the meetings with the Norway-plus people were genuinely good meetings. Jeremy was very engaged, and some of us who were trying to head off the People's Vote thought, 'Maybe this is the direction we can get into, or this will set us up for the indicative votes'.

We held them off all of January, until the 25 January, when there was a terrible strategy meeting where afterwards we came out and said that we support a public vote to stop, quote, 'A damaging Tory Brexit or a no deal outcome'.

A referendum to stop no deal was actually what was in the conference motion and I think is defensible. No-one was saying that we were going to leave with no deal in the referendum campaign. It is legitimate to say, ‘And is this actually what you want, because this is really quite at odds with what was in the campaign?’

No-one said we would leave without a deal. Everyone said, there would be a deal. I think (a referendum) on any other deal is democratically dodgy and politically bad as well.

This slippage from no deal to ‘damaging Tory Brexit’ was basically the final nail because that’s the most capacious thing. Anything the Tories do, you can say ‘the Tories are doing it. Of course it’s damaging’, and then you’re done. Of course, then we tried to push back. We tried to have the cross-party talks. We tried to do the indicative votes and all of that stuff, but from then on in it was just rolling towards us.

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If you were trying to recover from that, you then have an opportunity after the Prime Minister tried to get her deal through, fails a number of times, and on that final failure, finally opens up cross-party talks. Did you ever think the cross-party talks could offer you a way out of the steady drift towards a pro-referendum position?

James Schneider (JS): Yes, in one of two ways, but only if it happened quickly. I remember, after we announced that we were going into it, we had done a lobby briefing, chatting to two political editors from papers at different ends of the print spectrum.

We were going through what the concrete issues that were keeping us apart were, and what different people were hearing. The three of us were there, saying ‘There actually is a landing zone here. There is something that we could get to. There is enough mutual interest’.

I think, if we’d got more momentum in those first few days, maybe we’d have got there. But as soon as we didn’t get it and entered into this repeat cycle of quite good meetings between negotiators, their side promises to come back with something in writing, they take it back to May, one assumes she freaks out and they then come back with something in writing which is way less than what

they said verbally. This just goes back and forth, because you never actually get to one agreement on anything, no-one is locked into the process.

That was one way. One way it could have happened was an agreement early on, which was just about possible, I think. It was not a popular idea in our camp to do a deal with them. We did not want to have a rose-garden moment, but for some it was a way out. I did hope that there could be a way out through that (an agreement).

Then, the second way it could happen. Let's say you nailed down three wins, three things that you could agree on, but it couldn't go all the way. You couldn't actually get to that moment where Labour can say 'Yes, we're going to back this with our frontbench'. But could you get to a moment where the Government could have then tabled those amendments, the three things that we had agreed, and said, 'Look, we haven't agreed all the way, but…'

They tried to do this, they just screwed it up. 'Here we go. Here are three amendments. This improves our bill from the point of view of some Labour MPs'. Then Leave MPs get to vote for it or abstain, and maybe 30 or 40 of them abstain.

If that had happened quickly that could have, maybe, worked. John Mac (McDonnell) has got this great line, 'It's like trying to negotiate with a company going into liquidation, trying to do a deal with May and her team'. For us, our rebellion would have been larger with each passing week because there was the impact of Brexit not happening.

Brexit not happening suddenly made people realise, 'this really could not happen' and hardened their position. People in the PLP moved from a soft PV position that would have said yes to a customs union, yes to Norway Plus, yes to a May-plus-plus deal, and instead then moved to, 'no, actually we can get PV'.

The PV campaign kept on saying, 'Yes, we can get PV, and this is how we're going to do it.' Then there was all the ludicrous nonsense over the summer, with the Government of National Unity and all that absolute anti-democratic jibber-jabber. Also, they torpedoed the indicative votes process.

That's another contingent thing, which is, you can't say, 'If the People's Vote campaign had acted differently' because it wasn't in their interest to act differently. Their interest was to get a 'Stop Brexit' referendum, not to get a softer version of Brexit, and to sabotage Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

So, what it did was entirely within its interest, but the indicative votes could have been organised in a better way so that it's not in the interest of all the MPs voting to only vote for their top option and torpedo the other ones, which were the incentives that were set up in that system.

We had some people doing some different game-theory plans on what it would look like with different models of how we could do it, and trying to negotiate through a back channel with Letwin about what he was putting forward to the Government of the different ways in which we could do it.

The one that they came up with in the end was basically the worst possible option, because in most of the other ones in our internal simulations, something between a customs union and Labour's Brexit deal won every time.

UKICE: You talked about the People's Vote, the indicative votes and negotiations, but the other thing that's happening at the same time is the defections and the formation of Change UK. Did that influence the stance you were taking? Were you worried about potentially a bigger wave of defections affecting your policy thinking, or did you just regard them as 'good riddance'?

JS: Personally, no. Collectively, yes. With all the rumours of the new party, it's not like CUK-Tinge-PLC was the only formation in the offing. There was that bloke from LoveFilm, Simon Franks (United for Change). Jonathan Powell was reportedly looking into one.

But CUK-Tinge-PLC was the continuity, neoliberal, Remain party that we all got to know and love so much. I wasn't worried, maybe even a little excited about the prospect of there being a CUK-Tinge-PLC, because it's totally different to the early '80s. In the early '80s Labour's policy positions had minority support in the country. Now Labour's policy positions mainly had majority support in the country.

Then there was an unserved social basis and social constituency for pro-European centrism. In our time, there wasn't. The actual constituency that wasn't being represented, really, was a Brexit-y, social democracy thing, which is kind of what the Brexit Party tried to do. Not that their actual policies were social democratic, but they were saying 'Investment, regional stuff, support for people, support public services'. Of course, Nigel Farage is in no way a social democrat.

But there was also a big generational divide in what the approach to a potential new party would be, with older people in our camp, because they remembered the early '80s and how disastrous that was for Labour, being very, very anxious. John Mac has said he was worried about 50 or 60 going and that being a huge thing. Maybe he's right.

I was much less bothered about the idea of some self-deselection. I didn't think that they would disproportionately take away Labour votes, and if they had to stand on their own terms, they would receive next to no support, because very few people actively vote for neoliberalism. They voted for something else. That kind of managerial, centrist, establishment neoliberalism being so baldly put forward is not going to be electorally popular.

I remember the people's champion, and champion of bailiffs everywhere, Chris Leslie, who was our glorious sleeper agent within CUK-Tinge-PLC. They got wonderful fanfare and the Lobby was terribly excited about them when they set up. It was exciting, and they did that good photograph with them all looking up.

We were doing a Lobby briefing the next day, after PMQs. Of course, they're very excited about what we thought about CUK-Tinge-PLC, and we said, 'This is just a reheated corporate austerity, privatisation, pro-war politics. No-one is going to be very interested in it at all.'

They were outraged. 'How can you say that? How can you say that they support corporation tax cuts? How can you say that they support austerity, and privatisation, and war? We were at their launch yesterday and they didn't say they were in favour of any of these things?' We said, 'Of course that's their position'.

Thankfully Chris Leslie, champion of bailiffs everywhere, supporter of the political strategy targeting the *Which? Magazine* strata of society, gave an interview to George Eaton in which he said he supports corporation tax cuts, does not support free tuition fees, and does not support nationalising the trains. Wonderful, they oppose our three most popular policies.

I, personally, was very sanguine about the self-deselections and going off in that direction, but it did influence policy. Straight afterwards, Tom Watson set up the Future Britain Group, which was the Blairites and the Brownites getting back together, or so the briefing went.

Some people took that very seriously. But, again, I didn't take it terribly seriously, because they said, 'we're going to develop loads of policies'. But there aren't any policies. They don't have any policies to develop. There haven't been any ideas coming from that political area for some time. Okay, fine, the Lib Dems had skills wallets lol, but that's not where policy ideas had been coming from in recent years.

Of course, I might be being overly sanguine. I'm sure there is a point at which defections over a certain number would have started to cause bigger problems, but yes, it did have an effect.

UKICE: Change UK dies a death at the European parliamentary elections, I think it's possibly fair to say, but the Lib Dems do incredibly well.

JS: The Lib Dems did terribly. The Lib Dems did absolutely shockingly in the European elections, and I wish everybody had seen this.

The European elections are a low-turnout election, with only the most politically motivated to vote, voting. An election that has no importance to people's material lives, these people are not going to be in the European Parliament a very long time, and no-one knows what happens in that Parliament. It's a proxy referendum. That's what it is. What else are you signalling to the world, other than, 'Yes, I like Brexit', 'No, I don't like Brexit', by voting in that election?

In that election, the best the Lib Dems could do is 20%, when they were the biggest party that had the 'Stop Brexit' position. 'Bollocks to Brexit' was their

slogan. Not 20% of a turnout of 70%, but 20% of a turnout of 37%. They absolutely hammered themselves.

They did terribly, but this was presented as they did very well, because of some semi-mythical MRP, 30,000 people, ‘Hope not Hate’, ‘we’ve worked it all out and really the Lib Dems are going to win’, all this stuff. Such nonsense. The Tories got 9% of the vote in the European elections, and then they got 45% just a few months later.

They’re different. They’re different elections. Look at what’s actually going on. What does the election actually tell you? The election actually tells you that the constituency for hyper-Remain is, numerically, still quite marginal. It’s very loud, but, even in an election where it’s the only issue, less than 10% of general election voters plumped for the Lib Dems.

UKICE: Was your analysis was shared widely in Labour HQ or not?

JS: No, sadly not. There was lots of concern and jumpiness about it.

UKICE: Was the bigger problem that people started to claim that this was going to have an impact in Westminster constituencies? You had the poll that indicated that in the summer.

JS: Yes, it’s a problem because it’s another tool that can be used to push a particular agenda, but it is also bollocks. The thing, and you don’t need to be able to drill down to constituency-level data in order to do this, but look at Labour’s 50 most vulnerable seats and 50 target seats. How big was the Lib Dem vote in 2017 in those places? It’s very, very small. There’s not more to squeeze that way.

Polling in the summer of 2019 is very, very inflected with Brexit, and not ‘Who do you want to be the next government, and who do you not want to be next government? Who can you stop being the next government?’ As soon as the election was called, there was going to be a squeeze on the Brexit Party and on the Lib Dems, in favour of the Tories and Labour, even if some people preferred the Brexit Party and the Lib Dems.

That was a dynamic that was going to happen anyway, and was never factored

into any of those polls, which is why they weren't based in reality, but people believed them. Actually, the Lib Dems published their own report into the 2019 election, which made for quite interesting reading. Basically, they got high on that stuff, as well.

The Johnson Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You mentioned that you thought there was a gap in British politics for a Brexit-y social democracy. Were you slightly worried when you saw Boris Johnson's pitch for the Conservative leadership, that actually the Conservatives were taking over that mantle of being very pro-Brexit but also offering big public spending and investment?

James Schneider (JS): Yes, of course. Yes, that was good politics. That's the Cummings position, right? The thing that's particularly alarming about it is, if there's an election quite soon afterwards, no-one is expecting the change to have already happened. You can just say this, 'we're going to do some spending' and you don't have to have seen the hospitals, the police officers or whatever.

It's still in the realm of fantasy. It's not like the 2017 election, where people can see seven years of cuts, people can feel seven years of wage stagnation.

Actually, the Timothy-ists, or whatever you want to call that grouping, weren't able to force through their position, because essentially in that period, the Conservative Party broke down into three tendencies, in a similar way to the Labour Party in the mid-to-late '70s when their system was falling apart. Social democracy or neoliberalism.

You've either got, 'No, let's stick with where we are, everything is fine as it is', like (Anthony) Crosland in the Labour example, which was like continuity Cameronism. It's like 'No, we'll carry on with this neoliberalism stuff. We don't really need to change that, but we'll couple it with social liberalism and Remainism. Just carry on. It will be fine'.

There are the 'radicalise the system' people, Tony Benn in the Labour example or Liam Fox and the ultra-libertarian right people, like, 'Radicalise neoliberalism, take it further, more privatisation'. Then there's the 'The world

is changing, and either we lead the change, or the change will lead us' so (Denis) Healey monetarism, or May, (Nick) Timothy, 'We have to lead the spending. We have to be the answer to the crisis of austerity, to the burning injustices.'

They just didn't really do it, and then Johnson did it pretty effectively. I don't mean 'effectively' in moral terms or policy outcome terms. I just mean, in terms of political comms and strategy, it was very effective.

UKICE: If you look at the big events of the autumn, there's the move towards formally adopting a second referendum position at Labour Party Conference. Was it inevitable by the time you got to the Conference that that was where you would end up?

JS: Yes. Actually, it was a minor victory because it was a split motion. One said 'PV or death. Remain or destruction' and the other one just said 'PV or death' and 'trust Jeremy, he'll decide', basically. The latter one won, and that's because people like Len McCluskey went round conference fringes saying, 'I'm not a 48 or a 52. We're a 99%. I'm not a Leaver. I'm not a Remainer. I'm a socialist and this is the position that will most advance that cause.'

It was great that Conference did go for that overwhelmingly. It's just the ground had already shifted so far by that point. Also, the position that we had that wasn't the, 'PV or death, Remain or catastrophe' one was not a very well-worked-out position either, because, 'We'll renegotiate and then put our own deal to a referendum, and then we won't say whether we'll back it or not' sounds pretty laughable.

It doesn't sound as laughable when the other side don't have a deal, because saying, 'We'll have to go get one', sure. But when the other side say they've got a deal, then the bottom really falls out of that one.

UKICE: On that basis, what then are you thinking when you've got this war of attrition between Johnson and Parliament over whether there should be a general election, and Parliament is basically standing in the way?

JS: Ghastly. The whole thing was so ghastly. Let's just pull back a bit to July,

for the grand narrative. Do you know how we knew what the other side were going to do – the other side being the Tories, Number 10, Johnson, Cummings?

They said it. They said ‘It’s the people versus Parliament. We’re going to get Brexit done. We’re going to break the rules to get it done. We don’t care, enough of this sabotage, Remainer Parliament, establishment Parliament’. That’s what they’re going to do, and they do it with spectacle.

From a technical point of view, it was brilliant. They had a strategic comms narrative that they wanted to make real, and they made real through actions. Again, most people aren’t following politics day to day. What is the zoomed-out story that they’re hearing? Boris Johnson really, really, really wants to do Brexit. He’s fed up with all of this nonsense. It’s stopping everything, and this crap load of MPs – people hate MPs, people hate politicians – they’re getting in the way. By the way, Boris Johnson wants to give money to the NHS, and people love the NHS. Brilliant, so good.

What did Labour do? It’s not really what Jeremy wanted to do, but what was done by Hilary Benn, the apparently brainy people, all the lawyer MPs, and also Keir and so on. We just walked straight into that, just walked straight into it and played our role perfectly for their story, to a tee.

All that stuff of, ‘Let’s get all the Remainer parties together’ and ‘We’re trying to work for a Government of National Unity’ – which nobody voted for and which nobody wants. ‘We’re going to anti-democratically overturn the result of the referendum by setting up an anti-democratic, technocratic government’. What are you doing? It’s death wish stuff.

My one small victory I had in all that is there is not a photo of Jeremy with all the Remain Party leaders, because we refused to let any cameras in our boardroom where we held the meetings. We made them have meetings at our place because there couldn’t be any photos, but, unfortunately, John Mac turned up to one of their things and they all did a selfie. It’s a terrible image. Why give the Tories what they want?

They are targeting a specific group of voters, and we know the voters they’re targeting, because they’re telling us who they’re targeting. They’re targeting

non-traditional Tory-voting Leave voters in small and medium-sized towns. What's going to appeal to them? Not shaking hands with Anna Soubry in a selfie photo, saying that we're going to team up to stop Brexit.

That was awful. Then there was this absurd prorogue thing, where everyone got very excited. There were protests to 'stop the coup'. It wasn't a coup. It's so out of touch with reality, and also terrible messaging. 'Defend democracy'? We don't live in a democracy, most people don't think that we live in a terribly democratic society. The Government doesn't do what we want, Parliament isn't doing what we want. We're not defending democracy through this.

Fortunately, I was out of the country when that happened. I was at my best friend's wedding. As the plane was taxiing, I started getting these messages from journalists, saying, 'Have you heard anything about proroguing? Do you get formal notification? We're hearing this'. The plane was just about to take off. Then it happened and my phone starts exploding with messages and calls. I was just like, 'Well, nothing I can do about this. Turn it off. There we go'.

Lots of people on the left were very pleased about that protest, and how they fought back and all the rest of it, but it just played into Johnson's story, not ours. The same thing was happening again with the election, right? We said for two years 'We want a general election now'. They come and say, 'Here you go. Have your general election'. We say, 'No, because of… umm… checks notes… umm… yeah… this reason. We want one, of course, because the Government is bad, and homelessness and poverty– but also this damn reason'.

It looked stupid, and it was stupid. If we had gone for an election for October 24th, they wouldn't have had a deal. The squeeze message on the Lib Dems would have been so much bigger because it's 'vote Labour or it's no deal in a week'. Then we could have leaned much more towards Leave voters.

UKICE: That was a real missed opportunity?.

JS: Yes, and Keir was one of the main people arguing against that. The PLP was. The People's Vote campaign had tremendous purchase in the Labour Whips' Office.

They didn't want that, because they were still pushing for this 'Johnson's deal gets voted down again, and we get a Government of National Unity', or whatever. 'They'll give us a referendum and then we'll have a general election'. Pure fantasy. And so anti-democratic as it effectively rested on removing the elected leaders of the two main parties.

UKICE: Having not gone for the October general election, would you have then thought, once he gets a deal, hold off? Force him to put his deal through, add loads of caveats in Parliament, tie his hands, and basically make him sweat through to next year.

JS: How?

UKICE: By refusing to ever vote for the election.

JS: Why would that stop there being an election?

UKICE: It's under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act?

JS: No. You just need 50 plus 1, because you set the date of the election in a one-line bill, very simple. When we finally acquiesced to an election, and then pretended that we were super excited about it, the Lib Dems and the SNP were going to vote for the one-line bill. So the election was going to happen, regardless of what we decided.

This weird fantasy position you sometimes hear, and Emily Thornberry sometimes says it, 'We really didn't want this election, we just shouldn't have had it'. It wasn't our choice. We didn't have the numbers to stop it, so either you go into the election being dragged into it, kicking and screaming, or you go into it with a bit of, 'here we go'. But the underlying factor was there.

The one thing that we shouldn't have done was to vote down the programme motion for Johnson's deal once he got it through, arguing 'we need scrutiny for very important reasons'. Yes, fine, of course – Parliament, very important scrutiny, accountability, all the rest of it. Very important.

The political realities are, if it's voted down, he will push for the election. If there is an election, we are in a very bad position. If we are in a very bad

position, his deal will go through because he'll win the election. Then he'll get his deal through and there won't be any scrutiny, because he'll have a majority and he will get his deal through. So don't say, 'Yes, scrutiny, it's such an unprecedentedly short amount of time for a bill of such national importance'. No, screw that. He has got the votes. He won it. Get it through, fine.

Then, maybe, you can try to get in some amendment, but also maybe not. He has done it. Brexit is going to happen now. They said they couldn't get a deal. They've got a deal. Yes, it's a bit worse than May's deal, but also it isn't actually the deal. This is the joke. The deal wasn't the deal. Chequers isn't the deal. None of it is the deal. It's just the thing that gets you out for less than.

In this case, eleven months. The deal is the one that we just had (in December 2020). That's actually the deal. Also, let's say the deal – Johnson's deal – goes through, and there's an election and we leave the EU, and there's an election which we win, we can change bits of the deal we don't like. When we definitely do not change the deal is when we're making a rod for our own backs, and we're going to lose an election badly. That's the position we were driven into, or drove ourselves into.

The 2019 general election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Given your reticence about the tactics that led to a general election, did you know all along that you were on a hiding to nothing in the campaign?

James Schneider (JS): No. I would say that we were in a very difficult position, but we also had a lot of hope, based on the amazing experience of 2017. We also knew that certain aspects of our campaign were going to be better developed than in 2017. Our ground campaign was going to be better, for example. We were going to mobilise more activists. Policy was well developed and so on, so there was the idea that maybe it could happen again.

Actually, when the election started, it started really well. The first five days or so before the official campaign started, we had a much better start. For the first three weeks, four weeks, we rose very fast in the polls.

Actually, a lot of what happened in 2017 did happen in 2019. If you look at the favourability ratings of the two political parties, the Tories plummet downwards in 2017, as it did in 2019, and Labour shoots upwards, as it did. The only difference is that you can see the impact of the Tories' last four or five days' online spend – advertising spend – because there's a small reversal in the Labour one in that.

A lot of the dynamics were also there. It was going to be harder. It's going to be harder because it's winter. It's going to be harder because Brexit isn't a settled issue, and Brexit was a settled issue in 2017. It's going to be harder because Jeremy's M.O. of, basically, being straight-talking, honest, trustworthy, has been undermined by the Brexit process. So, lots of things were worse, but we still had some hope. It's not like we went into it thinking, 'We're done for by definition'.

UKICE: How far out from Election Day itself did you think 'This is not going to happen this time'?

JS: We plateaued a bit. Towards the end of November, maybe the third week of November, we were plateauing. We really needed something big to happen, but we still held out some hope because there was the (Donald) Trump visit. The Trump visit could have given us that extra surge that we needed. Not just because he's loathsome, and Boris is the slightly British Trump, but also because of our argument about Brexit, and about the Trump trade deal, and the threat to the NHS, the NHS is not for sale, and £500m a week out the NHS to drug companies, and so on and so forth.

In our planning, we needed to have a big boost from Trump, and that happened late. Then Trump was uncharacteristically disciplined, and he helped them out. There were other things where you realise that they're running a much better campaign. For example, other than our broadband policy, which Boris Johnson called 'broadband communism', they were unbelievably disciplined in not responding to any of our policy announcements.

In 2017, hysteria met all of our policy announcements, each individual one, which is brilliant. We live in an attention economy. They say, 'it's awful', it creates a row, controversy. It's more likely people hear it. Because the substance is so good, that's brilliant. 'Labour are awful. They want to do this

thing that you actually want'. That's cool. We can take the 'Labour are awful' top line, because we get the rest of the message out.

They were very careful to not do that, apart from on broadband communism, and to zoom up and zoom out to meta-attacks, which was a much better position for them, and then leave it to the Institute of Directors, or whatever, to put on record the technical rebuttal from the ruling class about why people shouldn't have nice things, and why rich people shouldn't pay tax. You would have two sentences from the IoD or whatever, at the bottom of a news piece, and that would be it. That was more effective.

Also, I remember one moment, watching one of their videos and realising that Johnson is a ruthlessly disciplined politician. He's not whimsical at all. He's very ruthlessly focused. One of his videos he put out, a short video, a minute or something. He's in a Jewish bakery in Golders Green, and he is saying, 'get Brexit done, get Brexit done, get Brexit done', and he's squeezing 'Get Brexit Done' icing onto doughnuts. He said, 'Yes, have a doughnut. Get Brexit done. Come on, get Brexit done and have a doughnut.'

That's the whole video. It's just him saying, 'yes, get Brexit done, fantastic. Doughnut, doughnut, get Brexit done'. The only thing that isn't him saying 'fantastic, doughnut, get Brexit done' is one sentence where he says, 'Your community, it's terrible what you've had to deal with, with Corbyn. But, instead, let's get Brexit done'.

I thought, 'Wow, that's amazing because that's him saying 'get Brexit done' for 30 minutes, surrounded by strangers'. It's incredibly embarrassing to edit that down to one minute. There's no off-the-cuff other stuff, joking around. He's not quoting Horace.

UKICE: But he's also giving you grief about anti-Semitism as well, isn't he? Was that a big problem in that election for you?

JS: Yes. I don't think it decided many people's votes, but I think it did have an effect in a number of ways. One, Jeremy was asked about it in every interview, and that meant that a certain proportion of every interview was taken up with what is a very negative issue for Labour. That clearly had an impact.

I think, also, the detail of it doesn't matter, but the fact it's still an issue goes to people's idea of competence. It's like, 'why haven't you sorted this out?'.

I'm Jewish. I don't think most people in the UK particularly care about anti-Semitism. I'm not saying that in a bad way towards people of the UK. I just don't think it's massively on people's radars, but what are you seeing, really, in the headlines? Like, 'Labour, Corbyn, problem, won't go away. Corbyn, problem, Labour, won't go away. Corbyn, problem, Labour, won't go away.' I think that builds it as a metanarrative.

Then, I think in a smaller way, one part of the function fed into some of the more alt-right type, digital, targeted adverts against the threat of Corbyn, where in some of these it seems a bit like anti-Semitism is like code for being pro-Muslim.

I think that played a bit of a function, but that's in one part of a story that helped mobilise two million voters who had voted Leave, who didn't vote in 2017, who did vote Tory in 2019. That would be one part of that mix, but I think the main thing is that it meant that quite a certain percentage of the time Corbyn was on TV, he was talking about something which was negative, and that was in every interview.

UKICE: Do you think there was a possible Labour Party position on Brexit at that election that would have been less of an albatross than the, 'We'll renegotiate, have a deal, and then we won't decide how we're going to vote on it'?

JS: It's so far gone by that stage. Yes, it would probably be better to have said 'The negotiating team will vote for the deal' or something, 'We'll give a free vote to Cabinet ministers'. Something like that that looks less like you don't know what you're doing, but it's already quite far gone, the policy, at that stage.

UKICE: Was there a discussion about a pivot towards Leave constituencies at one point?

JS: At some point in, maybe the third week in November – I might have the dates wrong, it's a very intense period, it's hard to remember all of the things

– the polling we were getting back from the Red Wall was not good. We added a number of seats to our priority list, and they were these Leave seats. That was true. That was a redirection of resources, but most people wouldn't have actually seen that.

Then there was a second thing, which was Ian Lavery and some other Leave-friendly, Labour-supporting people went on a bus tour around Red Wall seats, but I don't think most people in those seats would have necessarily seen that. I think they were worthwhile, but probably fairly low impact.

Then the third element is there were some discussions about, frankly quite small-fry, bubble type stuff that would signal that we were being a bit more Leave-y. Like that we would have a – quote – 'balanced' negotiating team, with some people that actually quite liked Leave, or that kind of small-fry stuff.

But without wishing to repeat my central points about political communications too much, if it's not zoomed out and making a controversy about something and telling a bigger story, no-one is listening. It's not worthwhile. So, we would have actually had to pick a fight – and a public fight and a messy fight – over how we were actually going to go for Leave, in the middle of an election campaign, for anybody to hear it. And that really wasn't an option.

UKICE: Do you think that Brexit, basically, ultimately did it for Corbynism in the Labour Party?

JS: Brexit is why we lost, but that could mean a whole number of different things, right? There is a fundamental challenge facing social democratic parties in the industrial world, which is two-fold. The first is how to come out of being the junior partner within a neoliberal system that has lost the consent of the majority of people.

The second is how to hold together a constituency that has a big cleavage between the remnants of the previous composition of the working class, which has had some of the benefits of Thatcherite and New Labour expansion in asset ownership and the asset price inflation of that period, although highly unevenly distributed; with a less well-organised, generally younger, more urban, more diverse, more precarious, less asset-rich, but with generally higher levels of formal education because of the expansion of formal education under

New Labour.

In 2017, because Brexit was less of an issue for a whole variety of reasons, the many, as it were, were able to be cohered across its different cleavages quite effectively. But then, by 2019, that was not the case – in part due to our own failings, in part a result of the situation. The main political axis being Leave/Remain hurt us, because it cuts across our constituents and our possible social majority in the country.