

Caroline Flint



MP for Don Valley May 1997 – December 2019

Shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change
October 2011 – September 2015

Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government October 2010 – October 2011

Minister of State for Europe October 2008 – June 2009

Minister of State for Housing and Planning January 2008 –
October 2008

Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform June
2007 – January 2008

Minister of State for Public Health May 2006 – June 2007

Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department of Health) May
2005 – May 2006

**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Home
Affairs** June 2003 – May 2005

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The EU and British politics, 2005-2015

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You were Minister for Europe around the time of the Lisbon Treaty. Did that experience change your perceptions of the European Union at all?

Caroline Flint (CF): The Lisbon Treaty was signed in December 2007 and then came into force in December 2009, which was just after I came into the Department. So, I wasn't there for the earlier part of the process. For me, the time a few years earlier as the Home Office Minister responsible for going to all the Justice and Home Affairs Councils had more of an impact on me, or informed my views in the years ahead, than being Europe Minister.

For example, I covered organised crime and drugs and the international crime element within the Home Office. So, part of my role in going to the Justice Home Affairs Council was recognising, how do we secure our borders from criminals? And obviously we weren't part of Schengen.

And at that time, going out every six weeks for two years, developing relationships with other partners across Europe. When I was there, (Nicolas) Sarkozy attended, David Blunkett was his oppo. Our input was affected by the UK having a distinctive stance on border issues and immigration. Within that, we accepted free movement, but we were very focused on things like advanced passenger information. It was post-9/11, so that added another layer to the discussion.

In many respects, despite not being part of Schengen, we punched above our weight in influencing that agenda. With our colleagues, not necessarily in a sister party, for example the Dutch, who had elected a more right-wing government at the time, you found common cause on some of our concerns about security.

Now, those discussions were not about free movement, because that's not illegal. It was about border security and the risks free movement created. But it certainly informed discussions about free movement and how do we make sure that doesn't enable others who want to exploit that, to the disadvantage of our citizens?

Over the years leading up to becoming Europe Minister, I had felt that the (European) Parliament was increasingly out of touch with many people in our country. The move to elect our MEPs on a regional basis was unhelpful. When we had an MEP covering South Yorkshire, difficult though it was to have the same relationship as a constituency MP, at least you had a sense of place, and people had an ownership within their sub-regional community.

I think we lost that when we went to a Yorkshire-wide system. This is nothing against the individuals, I think the structures of the system just made it harder to have that connection. When some of the rules changed to give more voice to the (European) Parliament, and had the Commission, heads of state and the (European) Parliament involved in decision-making, on one level I understand why that happened. However, it created communications problems. The EU Parliament had its own language, which might be quite different from the emphasis our Labour Government would put on issues.

Sometimes, the Labour Government and internally in the Labour Party, was at odds with some of our colleagues in the European Parliament.

So, when I came to the Foreign Office, I brought that experience with me. I witnessed a revolving door of EU ministers for many years.

There was no continuity of work, to address the issues that were causing a challenge in terms of the public's faith in the European Union, or support for it. Or to promote our relationship with the EU. There was little joined-up thinking across Whitehall.

The Foreign Office was very geared up to reflecting Britain's influence in the world, but it wasn't really about talking to the public in the UK, to explain our role and relationship with the EU. I found a lack of seriousness in the short time I was there towards engagement with Parliament.

An example I would give of that is, within weeks of being in the Department, I was up before one of the European Scrutiny Committees. And when I got my submission, to find out what was going on and read the briefing from the last meeting of the Committee, I found that nothing had been followed up. So, I was going into this Committee and the Chair would say, 'Well, we asked you to do this last time, Minister, what's happened?' And I had nothing, the cupboard was bare.

That led to a frantic round of discussions internally in the Department about, one, what can I say? And two, why did this happen? I made it clear that it shouldn't happen again, and I got a good telling off from the chair of the Committee, because we had clearly not done the work. It just really saddened me that, the FCO was not taking seriously enough what was a growing voice of

Euroscepticism within Parliament or the rise of UKIP and other Eurosceptic voices in the country. That was something that I tried to raise in the time I was there. We weren't listening, either the politicians or, for that matter, many of the civil servants, as to what was really going on beyond Whitehall.

UKICE: With the gift of hindsight, do you think the decision not to impose transitional controls on East Europeans in 2004 was a mistake?

CF: Hindsight is a wonderful thing. What was weak was the evidence base for why we were suggesting it was a good thing to do. There wasn't enough discussion about the impacts, and how you could mitigate against potentially some of those impacts of large numbers of people coming into our job market.

I seem to recall that when the Labour Government was challenged about why they weren't imposing any more controls that a number, something like 15,000, was about the number of people expected to come and take advantage of free movement. Well, we all know that that was an incredibly conservative number, compared to the numbers that did come in.

I think this is explained, somewhat, by where the focus was in our EU relationship. The New Labour Government was pragmatic on a lot of things. We weren't part of Schengen. We clearly, in a number of areas, did not want the optics to be seen as us in love with the European Union. I mean, we weren't averse to criticising and blaming it when things went wrong.

We wanted to establish good relations with the Eastern European countries which perhaps would counter-balance that strong French-German axis, that was so powerful within the EU.

And of course, at that point as well, nobody was thinking about the financial crash that was going to come.

That more than anything, exposed the weaknesses within our economy, the weaknesses within our labour market, and laid bare, in many communities, the loss of jobs amongst UK nationals. Many low paid, low skilled jobs became more insecure over the next decade.

So, there wasn't enough discussion on the potential negative impacts and

both Labour and the Tories backed the policy. I wasn't involved in any of those discussions – it was above my pay grade and I trusted the information we were given on impacts. Later, it was very hard to explain what had happened, when the numbers we gave for rejecting transitional controls was found to be wrong.

UKICE: Skipping to the Ed Miliband era, do you think the party should have supported a referendum?

CF: I felt we shouldn't support a referendum, and I don't think this was necessarily Ed Miliband's view, because I thought there was a good chance we would lose it.

We didn't have a referendum on the earlier constitutional discussion in the EU. Unlike the Irish, we didn't have to have one. But I think there was a good reason why: Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were probably concerned we might lose.

But in not supporting a referendum we didn't do enough to say, 'How do we repair and reform the European Union?' What would we do to address people's concerns? And one of the biggest areas of concern was free movement.

David Cameron was having a referendum partly to get some of his internal critics off his back and to help him win the next general election. I think he thought he would win the referendum and his optimism was a mistake.

There wasn't a huge amount of discussion in the Shadow Cabinet on this. It was Douglas Alexander, Ed Miliband, probably Yvette Cooper and Ed Balls, coming to the Shadow Cabinet with pretty much a fait accompli. On a number of occasions we did discuss the concerns of our base and the losses of council seats to UKIP, and UKIP's rising vote share.

Other members of the Shadow Cabinet and myself did raise this, but Labour has always found it difficult, dealing with some of the issues around immigration, particularly in Opposition. And there wasn't really any sensible hearing for that voice.

Where we did do something, it was usually knee-jerk or for a moment, to tilt to

some of those people who were thinking about voting for UKIP – ‘We get you’. But they didn’t really get it, and there wasn’t much discussion about the negative impacts of free movement as the positive impacts always filled the space.

We didn’t engage our party enough or the public in discussing what reforms were needed and how the present rules needed to be more strongly enforced.

UKICE: Was there any hint from the Conservatives that they were interested in reaching out to Labour to develop any sort of common cause, in the run-up to actually launching the renegotiation after the 2015 election?

CF: Not that I was ever aware of. Once Labour lost the general election, Ed vacated the leadership the next day, Harriet was left holding the baby and she conceded that the Conservatives had a right to hold the referendum. A leadership election was underway. When Jeremy was elected in September, there was no reason for the Conservatives or him to have a dialogue. He adopted a similar tack to Ed when Cameron brought back some small clarifications on the ‘emergency handbrake’ on immigration.

Jeremy had a history of opposing all immigration controls, over decades. He was always unlikely to support any new restrictions on migration.

Where Labour and the Conservatives failed was not providing a united front to get some reforms on free movement. When Cameron did try to get changes, too late I would suggest, we decided not to back him.

That’s a really good example of short-term tactics which down the road we all paid the price for. If there had been more cross-party unity it may have been harder for the EU to say no.

For the Labour Party, it would have shown in a tangible way that we were engaged in addressing fundamentally some of those concerns about free movement and its impact in some parts of the country where it wasn’t seen as beneficial as, say, in London. And that was a missed opportunity.

Part of the problem for Labour was for decades seeing the EU as a problem for the Conservatives and not for us. It gave Labour the opportunity to exploit Tory

division. I have been guilty too. You take the opportunity to stir up the hornet's nest and sit back and enjoy the chaos happening on the Tory benches. But short-term tactics and simply stirring up divisions can make us feel good at that moment but end up a hollow victory.

And then along comes a referendum, and you suddenly realise what you might have done to better influence the outcome.

The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When you saw the package that David Cameron brought back from his renegotiation, did you think that it was going to be something you could sell to some of the voters in Don Valley, who might be teetering on the brink of voting Leave? Or did you think 'It's never going to cut it'?

Caroline Flint (CF): I didn't think it was enough. It wasn't enough to placate the Eurosceptic voices in his Party or outside. Added to which Labour was saying he'd failed. How would that influence my voters?

On this issue many of my voters – and people who were inclined to be Labour Leavers elsewhere – were already listening much more to the likes of Nigel Farage, and that was having the cut-through. So, Cameron coming back and Nigel Farage saying, 'This is a pile of rubbish, it's not going to change anything', probably had more impact on some of those voters than anything I, or our party leader, could have said at that point.

So many politicians of all parties had relinquished a space to UKIP – and by UKIP, I mean Nigel Farage – that, although our Labour voters would listen to us on lots of issues like the NHS, when it came to this they said 'I'm Labour through and through, but I really don't like the EU and I disagree with you on this'.

I'd been hearing that on the doorsteps for years. In European elections, trying to convince people who would say 'I'm a Eurosceptic, we should have never gone in'. It's been there for some time. Then there were the pragmatic voters, probably better off in than out but didn't know their MEPs or care much about voting in a European Election.

It was one of my big concerns for Labour, during my time in Shadow Cabinet, that we weren't really listening to those voices, and where we did listen we weren't comfortable. Polling told us there was a problem for Labour so we would find some way to maybe virtue signal that we were listening, but it wasn't given enough space to seriously inform our policies, interventions and communications.

UKICE: You said you were worried about losing the referendum when you were in Opposition. Did you go into the referendum campaign itself in 2016 thinking 'we've got a really good chance of losing it'?

CF: Oh God, yes, absolutely. I remember going to an early meeting, at the end of 2015 or maybe early in 2016 at the House of Commons, for Labour MPs. I don't know whether Chuka (Umunna) had set it up, but he was there along with the guest speaker Carolyn Fairbairn from the CBI.

I thought we were better off in the European Union, but I was pragmatic about it too. So, I wanted to do whatever I could to support the remain campaign and contribute on the challenge in areas like mine. But I remember going to this meeting and asking how the campaign was going to handle concerns about immigration and free movement.

And as I think about it now, it was like one of those tumbleweed moments I have experienced before. The response was polite but no real desire to engage. The meeting moved on quickly to how great the UK economy was and how we relied on the EU for all our social benefits.

I came out of that meeting thinking, 'Oh God, I've had so much of this'. If they don't want to listen, at least I can say I spoke up. It was like that in the Shadow Cabinet, when I used to raise UKIP's influence.

When a sub-group of the Shadow Cabinet was set up to try and deal with the rise of UKIP, I fought to be on it but felt marginalised in that process. I was full of dread for the coming referendum.

In the campaign we were lucky to get eight volunteers out on a canvassing session. It was hard to even get Remain members onto doorsteps. The Labour Party actively told us to avoid our working-class areas and just focus on getting

the vote out in the middle-class areas. It was hard.

If the Remain people had put as much effort into the referendum that they have since, when they lost, who knows if it might have been a different story. In Don Valley we did go into our working-class communities too. I thought if there was any chance of holding onto some of these people, then we had to go out and see them. I didn't want UKIP and others to make out that we weren't interested.

I had a relationship with these people where, we might disagree on this issue, but they were still my Labour people, I am part of their family. But no matter how much you then fed back into the centre about what was going on, it just wasn't really being heard. So, I was full of dread.

The Remain campaign was awful, not just the one led by Stuart Rose. Jeremy was ineffective, but he wasn't the only factor in all of this. It was a numbers game. I think probably those at the head of the national campaigns thought they would get a higher turn-out in places like London to tilt towards a Remain outcome. But in London, I think it was 60-40, not as big a vote for Remain as some people thought. So, relying on a city, university, middle-class vote didn't work.

UKICE: Remain majored on the economy and the risks to jobs. Did any of that resonate with your Labour, working-class, Leave-leaning voters? Were they worried about the economic fallout of reducing links to the European Union?

CF: Not as much as people thought. It's not that they're not concerned about jobs, but they would look within their own economy and they would look within their own community, where a huge proportion of the jobs are low-paid, low-skilled jobs.

A city like London, with a more balanced job market and hundreds of years of waves of immigration into communities is very different to a community where the only history of migration was workers from other regions of the UK. Where a local factory recruits directly from eastern Europe – and overnight you experience a substantial change in your workplace.

I do think that there were some employers that exploited free movement

through agencies, and we didn't do enough about it.

Most businesses in Doncaster are SMEs, not big corporates. The Doncaster business voice was quiet. I organised a business event with Alan Johnson, but it was hard work to get a business to provide a remain quote for the press.

So, the Remain campaign worked for some parts of the country, but not in mine. Talking about the net-benefits of being in the EU for UK Plc didn't work.

So, when the campaign was saying, 'look at the benefits to the UK', of course there is a truth in that. Many people who come to work in the UK via free movement make a positive contribution. I have made those points in many doorstep conversations.

But the benefits aren't distributed fairly across the country. More and more investment to London, and more power to demand more from Government. In our towns they see huge attention on our cities and money spent on transport projects that don't connect towns but one city to another.

We had Objective 1 funding in South Yorkshire and that the Remain campaign used that to illustrate the importance of the EU. But for you can't expect people to base their future votes on being thankful for something that happened 10 or 15 years

'Do you know what? That road in the Dearne Valley, the EU paid for that'. And then someone says, 'But why do I care about that? I don't live in the Dearne Valley. I don't work in the Dearne Valley'. This idea that somehow people are going around with this encyclopaedic knowledge of every improvement and how they have benefitted from it is ridiculous.

Look, I think one of the biggest problems about the referendum campaign is why on earth David Cameron, having decided to use it to help win 2015 general election, hadn't given more thought to how he would win it before setting the date.

You use the tools of government to explain better the relationship and the complications trade, security, jobs in advance of the referendum? Rather than trying to put together documents in the midst of a campaign, which just allows

Leave to say, 'Oh, here we go: Project Fear'.

Because who on earth goes into a referendum without doing the groundwork? Did their view of UKIP and their voters stop them taking seriously the possibility of losing?

Were they so arrogant that they didn't even think about losing the referendum and the consequences that would mean for everyone across the Civil Service and society, having to work in a completely different way? I find that one of the hardest things, the lack of forethought and responsibility.

I say that not because it would have necessarily produced a different result but at least you could feel better that some serious thought and planning took place.

After the referendum campaign, when all those leading the various Remain campaigns were crying into their glass of whatever, I had little sympathy for it, because I was angry about their complicity, in making the worst of what was going to be a difficult job anyway.

Labour's campaign was confusing. Jeremy (Corbyn) is a known Eurosceptic. My understanding was that some chose to serve in Jeremy's Shadow Cabinet, on the basis that he would campaign for Remain. His scepticism may have been used better in helping to convince Labour Leavers, but no convincing strategy emerged.

Jeremy didn't want to take part in the cross-party campaigning, opting out of photo opportunities, sending somebody else along. That is not new when it comes to the EU, Gordon Brown sent David Miliband along to sign the Lisbon Treaty rather than be seen to join the other Presidents and Prime Ministers at the formal signing.

There clearly was, from what Alan Johnson has revealed, a lot of conflict and tension between what Alan was trying to do and Jeremy and his office. I think Jeremy was going to rallies organised by 'Another Europe is Possible', taking an anti-capitalist stance. It was very disjointed, and Jeremy played his part in that, but he isn't the only one to blame for Remain not winning.

But it was just another difficult challenge to deal with, in terms of convincing voters.

The Leave campaign, to be honest, they were better. They were focused. Their messages were clearer. Yes, people are concerned about their jobs. But I think in communities like mine and elsewhere, in the North and the Midlands, who voted Leave, many of these communities have lost major industries before while we were in the European Union.

So, every time some of my colleagues would say 'You're better off in the European Union' I said, 'Yes, but that's not really working with people whose standard of living has already gone down'. But they didn't want to hear that.

UKICE: Where were you on the night of the referendum and what you thought, when you heard the result, would happen next.

CF: I was in Doncaster throughout the referendum campaign. I did some campaigning regionally, debates and media. But I can remember, as the votes came in, watching it on the telly, from home in Doncaster. I seem to recall there was a Remain event on the South Bank.

And I remember, as the night unfolded, at one point Nigel Farage thinking they had lost. Then they kept switching to the Remain party, with Chuka Umunna and other Labour people.

As more news came in, I said 'I think Leave are going to win'. From what I could see just as a viewer watching it on the telly, from the faces in the Remain camp, when the result came through, they looked shocked. Really shocked.

I think Farage was quite surprised, from what I recall as well, but he recovered quickly, having suggested earlier he was going to lose. Not so good a recovery for the other side.

It wasn't a huge surprise. And I just came away from it feeling, 'Well, that's it'. I had already had conversations with those close to me about, 'If we lose, what are you going to do?' My view was we had to accept the result. And shortly after that, with the agreement of my colleagues, Rosie Winterton and Ed Miliband, we put together a statement saying we accepted the outcome of

the referendum.

I think that was a few days afterwards. This was about how we rebuild a relationship, going forward with Labour Leavers. And where we could influence to achieve the best outcome we could get, when it came to a Withdrawal Agreement deal and a trade deal down the road.

Brexit in Parliament, 2017-2019

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Were you quite happy with the Labour position in 2017? Did you go into that election thinking that you were in trouble in Don Valley, or did you think the Brexit position, as it was, would get you through?

Caroline Flint (CF): I think many Labour MPs thought the outcome of the 2017 election with Jeremy Corbyn as leader was going to be worse than it turned out to be. But our Brexit position in the general election was the best I could have hoped for in 2017.

UKICE: So, you thought you might lose in 2017?

CF: Oh yes. And that was because of Jeremy Corbyn and his politics left us open to the Tories exploiting that, plus we were divided as a party.

But as it was, politics is about timing and choices. Hubris by Theresa May, who was looking at the polling and thinking, 'Labour is going to be routed here, here is a really good opportunity for me to assert my leadership as the Prime Minister and boost the Tory majority'. She made the wrong call and ran a bad campaign.

I think there was quite a lot of Remain tactical voting going on which helped Labour too in some places against the Tories. This was despite Labour being clear in our literature and from the top that we respected the outcome of the referendum, the decision had been made, we are leaving the European Union. That's what we had on our first national leaflet and was reflected in our manifesto as well.

Some Remain voters felt that despite that, tactically, it was better to vote

Labour, to try and stop the Tories, rather than voting Liberal. So, there was certainly tactical voting that helped Labour. Also, we did tremendously well in our cities and some university towns, like Canterbury, because the election was held at a time when students were still around and they were all riled up about the referendum result.

Where there was a strong Labour Leave vote, we probably benefited from Remainers, including Liberals who voted Labour because it was a straight race between Tory and Labour in places like Don Valley.

But I was able to hold onto Labour Leavers, because of the strong message we were saying nationally, and what I was saying locally about respecting the outcome of the referendum and working to get a deal. I wasn't the only Labour candidate who said that but I think I stood by my 2017 promises more than some. Policies like re-nationalising the train companies were popular too. I had a lot more help from the regional party and from the Labour Party nationally than I did in 2019. There was a sense of a defensive strategy in 2017, that didn't exist in 2019.

UKICE: If you then move into what we could call the Brexit Parliament, you fought the election on Labour's manifesto about Brexit. Were you becoming increasingly concerned about the direction in which the Brexit stance of the Labour Party was going?

CF: After the European referendum most of us said we should respect the outcome of the referendum.

UKICE: And there was a very big vote in favour of triggering Article 50.

CF: Exactly. So, I didn't at all feel that I was at odds with the Labour Party, Jeremy or most MPs. I knew, from previous discussions, that I was more bullish about some of the challenges of the European Union and concerned about how we were seen on free movement.

But on the basic principle of not backing a second referendum and getting on with it, there was nothing between me and someone like Chuka Umunna or Yvette Cooper. I read articles where Chuka talked about his tour of the country listening to voters in places like Boston, Lincolnshire and making clear we

would have to accept we are leaving the European Union.

Loads of colleagues had made it clear they wouldn't back a second referendum. I think what happened after 2017, and where the dynamics changed, was the surge in our vote amongst Remain voters in cities and university towns, along with our membership being concentrated in those areas. Much of the membership who supported Jeremy for leader were not happy about the outcome of the referendum and his stance in accepting the result.

When we didn't lose as many seats as it was thought we would in 2017 it vindicated Jeremy's supporters, who even claimed it as a victory. That embedded his dominance within the Labour Party, within the NEC and our own internal machinery.

For some being pro- European Union was the place moderates could go to exert pressure without being viewed as anti-Jeremy.

Others did not accept the referendum and just would do anything they could to stop us leaving the EU. Then if you were on the shadow frontbench you wanted to keep your job. Like everything in politics there a fusion of different motivations which drives support and that was the case in the lead up to Labour supporting a second referendum.

After the referendum, I remember taking part in a debate in Keir Starmer's constituency with Polly Toynbee and Stephen Bush. Keir told me 'I really want people to hear about what it's like in Doncaster and what people think'. I think he was sincere about that.

It was an opportunity to say to people, 'You have to understand what it's like living in an area where you don't have 24/7 transport'. Where you don't feel any personal benefit of being in the EU. That 'Europe' is a place to go on holiday, but that doesn't mean they like the EU in the way you do.'

It was a very friendly exchange and at that time there was a lot of reaching out and engagement going on to reach a common ground. But, as time went on, it stopped. Firstly, it was hard for Jeremy or his key supporters to do anything which indicated they were going to work with the Conservative Government to

agree a deal.

Then the campaign for a second referendum gradually took more of a hold over Labour's direction. The majority of Labour Party members voted Remain and lived in Remain seats. Sometimes it is easier to say what the members want to hear, regardless of the political consequences.

Getting the balance right between representing members' views, but also making sure members understand what the different voices of electors are saying about Labour, is not easy.

The openness of discussion in the PLP became more difficult too. Regardless of what the polling said about the views of Labour leave voters, attempts to discuss this were increasing shut down.

UKICE: When you looked at something like Theresa May's Chequers proposal, or the Withdrawal Agreement that she ended up negotiating, and her accompanying political declaration, did you actually think, 'This really isn't bad as a starting point for my Labour Leavers?'. It didn't seem a million miles away from what Labour, at various points, said it wanted.

CF: Yes. But part of the problem, which overtook the merits of any deal, was that Labour MPs saw Theresa May's reduced majority as an opportunity to make life difficult for her. Among the new Tory MPs are more Eurosceptics who won't be her allies.

There was the potential for more cross party working earlier, but May instead tried to get a result without having to work with Jeremy Corbyn. It was only at the point where it became really clear there was no way she would get agreement without Labour, that she started to hold out the offer to do that. That was all about politics on her side.

I knew there was no such thing as a perfect deal, but we could work for a deal that would let us leave in an orderly manner. And the first deal was just to leave, the 'divorce' headlines. My view was that down the road, Labour could further influence the detailed arrangements but let's get over the leaving hump first.

By the time she started reaching out, after Chequers the battle lines had been drawn. In our party, the second referendum voice was getting stronger. I thought that the Tory Party, often more ruthless than the Labour in winning and holding on to power, would get their act together to agree a deal. I'm sure others shared this view in the PLP and thought 'Why should Labour help May out?'

I had been developing discussions with Labour MPs who voted Remain and were against a second referendum, but who wouldn't vote for a Tory-inspired deal. It was difficult because one played into the other. We weren't going to be able to a second referendum off the table without agreeing to a deal. Whatever deal Theresa May came up with, to convince more Labour MPs to come across, we had to get more concessions and protections.

We did get guarantees on employment rights and environmental protections as well as agreement on Parliament's role in shaping the trade negotiations in the next phase. I think she pretty much ticked very single box that Labour was asking for.

Of Labour's tests, the one she couldn't guarantee was that the UK wouldn't be worse off and continue to have the same benefits as we did in the EU. This arose from a throwaway comment from then Brexit Secretary David Davis, claiming this in answer to questions by a select committee. I can imagine, Labour Party apparatchiks watching, and saying, 'That's brilliant, let's grab that as the benchmark for Labour agreeing a deal'. Of course, it was ridiculous and could never be met.

But as a test it locked us in even though, when asked, we couldn't explain what could meet that test. People outside saw it as a tactic not a principle for negotiation. To Labour Leavers, it just confirmed further their view that Labour wasn't serious about working to get a deal.

There were colleagues who said they were open to backing a May deal despite the Labour whip, but when it came to the crunch they didn't. For some, because there were still too many Tories and the DUP not supporting May to make it worth it and pressure from the Labour whips, colleagues and others was intense. Others gave the impression they would but were never going to. I believe there was a missed opportunity cross-party to support a deal with firm

concessions.

I hoped – and I suppose this is what I was investing myself in – that, regardless of the grief I got during that period, if we had got to the point where we actually left the European Union and got into the space where we were discussing the next phase of detailed negotiations, the numbers would have meant that Labour would have had more leverage to play a much more important, influential part in shaping those talks.

For the public who voted Leave we had achieved the most important thing, leaving the European Union. And that, to be honest, beyond all the detail that we got involved in Westminster during that time, was the issue by which Leave voters were judging this whole process, and we had to get beyond that.

I knew if that didn't happen and there was a general election, my seat and many other Labour seats would be lost too. I knew that throughout 2019.

When it came to the votes on May's deals, I knew colleagues who were supporting a second referendum and wouldn't support a deal, but were hoping there were going to be enough Labour MPs to get a deal over the line. They would be pure whilst we were hung out to dry. Given the right assurances and concessions I had already said I was prepared to vote to support a deal. Because I hoped in the next stage some of the heat would be taken out of the debate in Parliament and Labour could have a better public conversation.

But the Prime Minister could not get the ERG behind her. It was somewhat ironic when I got accused of voting with the Tory Government, some of those same people voted with the likes of Jacob Rees-Mogg and other members of the ERG to stop Theresa May's deals.

Once Johnson became PM, I don't think Labour ever thought Boris would negotiate a deal, let alone want one. Arrogance, and under-estimating him as an opponent, got in the way of the leadership ever thinking that could happen. I thought if he could get a deal he would. (And I thought it would be little different from May's deal)

Because he came out of that leadership election with all this support for him and massive popularity in the Tory Party, he could get away with things, and

he has done. All these Eurosceptics, who had invested so much faith in him, he pushed back at them and the DUP, in a way that Theresa May could never do.

So, it wouldn't be a shoo-in, but I knew from my own discussions with some of his people it could happen. I had conversations with Theresa May, Julian Smith and others and when Boris became leader that continued with his people to see what we could still salvage in terms of the concessions we had agreed with May's team.

When Boris Johnson came back with a deal, that shocked Labour. Not just Jeremy, but across the PLP and our party.

For some of the people who were against the second referendum, and who were saying that they were prepared to vote for a deal, they never imagined it would be a Johnson deal that would provide the opportunity to do so. So, ultimately, when it came to the Boris deal the vote to support it on the Labour side fractured again. And there we are.

On the day of the vote, there were discussions within our group about voting for the second reading and the programme motion (which grants the time for the bill to complete its stages) and reluctance to do both. I argued at the time that if you vote for the second reading and it passes and not for the programme motion and it falls, the government would go for an election.

UKICE: Especially during the tail end of Mrs May, how strained did your relations with PLP colleagues get?

CF: It was difficult, very difficult. Inside and outside of the chamber. And I was coming to this position without any ambition for myself or game playing. I had been consistent all the way through, from the 2016 referendum result. No-one could say that I jumped around all over the place. I tried to approach everything with a straight bat.

I voted Remain, I campaigned for Remain. I was having to deal with Brexiteers who didn't think I was 'Brexit' enough. And high profile Remainers including Labour people, who painted me as a 'Brexiteer'. Along with abuse and trolling on social media.

It was hard. Remain colleagues and commentators would accuse me of not telling my constituents the truth. I mean, I can go through boxes and boxes of emails where, every time I voted with Theresa May, Leave constituents thought it was too soft.

Every vote I took, I really thought about it very closely. I voted for a customs union on the indicative votes. And that would be something that I was explaining nationally and locally about what I was doing and why.

Throughout the whole process, the Leave and the Remain sides became more polarised. No deal was ever going to be good enough for either. So, the only way through was whether enough of us, cross-party, could somehow cobble something together so we could get to the other side of this. And by the other side, I mean just leaving. I thought it was better for the Labour Party to do that and have leverage in the second phase.

I had colleagues standing up in the chamber opposing me, chuntering behind me or giving me the silent treatment. I would try and intervene on Keir and he would never take me. Fair enough.

I like John Bercow. But it seemed that the Speaker was more and more becoming identified with those who wanted to stay in the EU, which did not help the atmosphere. When it came to debates, some of my Labour colleagues who were against a second referendum didn't feel they got a fair opportunity to speak compared to those who did.

The sort of chats you would have with colleagues about other policy areas, informal chats, stopped happening. Everything was seen through the Brexit lens.

A Labour Leave seats group was set up in the PLP, but it was pretty much organised that the chair would be someone who supported a second referendum. So, every chance within the formal PLP to say something about the impact of Labour's stance on our voters was being shut down in different ways.

PLPs meetings were awful for many reasons including when we heard from colleagues dealing with anti-Semitism. On Brexit, myself and other colleagues

with similar views didn't feel listened to, our questions weren't answered.

The majority of Labour MPs I met and organised with like me voted Remain in 2016. As a group we organised meetings with Jeremy. We met with John McDonnell. We met with Keir who never said no to a meeting. But we didn't really feel we were making any headway and having any influence.

During 2019, many of the MPs supporting the second referendum knew that we would not win an election under Jeremy. I never thought we would win a general election with Jeremy Corbyn as our leader. So, I think what started to emerge was discussion about who would be the next leader. To achieve that you would have to be a second referendum supporter, because the majority of our members are. That drove the position of leading figures.

UKICE: How resonant was the charge that you had to get rid of this non-functioning Parliament because it was blocking Brexit with your constituents?

CF: Absolutely, all the time. I mean, every tactic was seen as just trying to stop Brexit. I mean, that's why I didn't vote for a number of the amendments that Oliver Letwin, Yvette Cooper and Hilary Benn put forward.

I found the whole 'say no to no deal' mantra meant nothing when many of them had no interest in any realistic deal.

I remember Caroline Spelman and Jack Dromey organising a meeting for MPs, with Theresa May. And it was packed, it was massively packed. But you know what? It was clear that most people weren't really interested in having a proper dialogue with Theresa May. There were a few people who wanted to have a discussion, from both sides, but it was outweighed by the numbers of people, particularly Labour people, who just laid into her.

I mean, they were just completely pro-second referendum, People's Vote. I felt for her in that meeting because if it was me I'd think that was a complete waste of my time.

I couldn't understand why industry seemed to just hide behind 'say no to no deal' and not lobby MPs more to back a deal. I had some private discussions with the CBI, who probably just wanted to find out what I and my group was up

to. I told them what I was hearing from Doncaster and other Leave areas. I gave them my view about where I thought the Government might be in terms of trying to reach a deal and meeting some of their concerns. But they never really did anything.

Given all the money and the power the CBI have amongst its membership, I can't remember them ever really getting behind any deal that Theresa May put forward to squeeze the Remainers and put pressure on the political parties. To say to Labour, 'For goodness sake, let's get practical here, this is the only show in town, if we don't get behind this she could be gone and Boris Johnson could come in. Now is the time for us to move on'. They never did that in any powerful way.

Normally, if you have a campaign from industry, MPs would be inundated with trade associations and individual businesses lobbying you. That didn't really happen for a deal. Instead they seemed to be fixed on campaigning only for 'say no to no deal' but never saying yes to any deal.

Look, I'm not saying that there weren't Leave voters who were thinking, 'What the hell have we voted for? We never signed up for this, four years of chaos'. But I think the other side of that was pragmatic Remain voters, who thought, 'For goodness sake, let's just get on. We're fed up with this,' For Leave voters it entrenched their view that corporate Britain was just another part of the 'establishment' trying to stop Brexit.

Every time there was a vote in Parliament, every time there was another clever little tactic, my email box would be full of people saying 'We know what they're up to, we know what they're doing'. And again, it came back to trust which was being eroded day by day.

Outside of the Westminster bubble, they felt Parliament was trying to stop Brexit.

I made the point time and again that Labour would pay the price at a general election if we hadn't already left the European Union. And sadly, when it came to the 2019 election, I was right. I take no joy in that. I was heartbroken at the loss of so many Labour voters and the jury is out as to whether they will return.

The future of British politics

UKICE: Do you think those voters are more likely to return now that Brexit is done? Do you think that, actually, Brexit was the reason, and so there is a possibility that those voters will drift back to Labour?

CF: Of course there is a possibility with the heat taken out of the Brexit debate that may happen. But it is about rebuilding trust which isn't straightforward. Labour lost voters who for generations, had voted nothing but Labour. There is a magic in that relationship. But once the spell is broken, you can't just think you're going to get it back.

And of course, Brexit wasn't the only issue. A lot of these voters felt uncomfortable with, or actively hostile to, Jeremy Corbyn. Even in the northern seats we won, like Ed Miliband's and Yvette Cooper's, their much larger majorities went down enormously. Where people didn't vote Tory, they voted for the Brexit Party.

Now, will they come back? I think we can work to win their support and earn their trust again. The danger is that they don't vote at all, they've had enough of politics.

Not just Labour Leavers, there were Labour Remain voters who were fed-up as well, they thought we should just get on with it, and they voted Tory too.

Trying to win people back, not only to vote for you again, but to vote at all, is a challenge. And of course, now, there are Conservative MPs in these places and the Tory benches are more diverse.

I expect that the Fixed-Term Parliament Act is dead. So, we will have a Conservative Government choosing when to have an election. And therefore, like other governments, they will be choosing their best time.

So, we have to understand the challenges. But there is still room in all this for Labour to reflect and enable the party to move forward. And that is why I agree with Keir Starmer voting for the deal. He's had quite a hard time over it by some in the Labour Party and by prominent Remainers. But he is absolutely right to do that, and he's right to say that he's not going to campaign to go

back in.

Keir and the front bench team need to earn people's trust in Labour again. People can see through what is tactical and what is sincere.

UKICE: Do you think by the next election, Labour will want to still just say 'We voted for the deal' and nothing further? Or do you think that, given the nature of the Johnson Brexit that we've just seen, that there will be scope for Labour campaigners to say 'Actually, we've sacrificed a lot by going for this very distant relationship with Europe'?

CF: I believe if we have an election in 2023, 2024, it will hard for anyone to really properly evaluate that. We have trade problems at the moment – with fishing access and goods having extra costs added on. But it is too early for anyone to be able to say we can go into the next election clear about the impact of leaving the European Union.

I cannot see Keir Starmer wanting to re-open a debate on Europe which might play to Johnson's strengths. The problem for Labour is, how do you get that balance right between challenging the Government of the day and exposing where they are incompetent? But if you sound like you want things to be bad, or want things to fail, this would not be a great look if you are trying to project a vision for the future.

There are lots of structural problems in our economy that we need to address and put right. How do we rebalance our economy? How can we make more to sell at home and abroad?

We have learnt through the pandemic, that when we want to, we can get manufacturing going, vaccines for example. PPE – from a starting base of 2% being produced in this country at the start of the pandemic to something like 70% now.

So, Keir is absolutely right to make clear now and in the next manifesto, 'We've left the European Union, we're not campaigning to go back in'. He will have to have answers to questions about renegotiating any changes to our trading arrangements. But again, that will be determined by what's coming up after that general election, as we approach the five-year deadline. But for the

most part, I think it is about closing the chapter on the last four years and moving forward.

The Labour Party needs to focus on our hopes for the UK and coming up with tangible policies that really speak to how we can be resilient to pandemics, or economic shocks, in the future. How do we deal with the health inequalities that have been laid bare in the last year? How do we create better jobs in the future?

How do we get to zero carbon without further setting back the so-called left behind towns where jobs carry the highest levels of emissions in the UK? How do we retrain people in work, realise the opportunities for every community and win support for the enormous changes needed to meet the Government's 2050 target.

Labour could pitch its tent and really own this agenda.

First, it is about reconnecting and winning back trust. And Labour has got a bit of time to work that out. When the public want to listen to Labour again, what Keir says and how he is perceived will stick in voters' minds, so he needs to make it count.

It will be a challenge for some members, MPs and former MPs still in denial about what happened to lose the so-called 'red wall' seats, but we need to move on.