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The renegotiation and the referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Was it a no-brainer that the Conservative Party was going to move to a pro-referendum policy in 2013?

Chris Wilkins (CW): I'm not sure that's the common view necessarily. So, I know David (Cameron) strongly took that view, and therefore he felt he should be the Prime Minister who did it because he would argue for in rather than out. I mean, it still felt with my involvement in the party at that time like largely a fringe issue, really, that was being pushed by a few loud voices.

It still felt like a party management tactic rather than anything else. And certainly, going into 2015, which is when I was more involved as special advisor in the Department of Education in the year leading up to the 2015 election, it still felt like something had been injected for party management purposes and for political purposes. If we'd come out of the election with the Coalition Government that we were all expecting, it might well have been put on the back burner.

So there's quite a few people who think that winning the 2015 election was a surprise. And suddenly you were landed with this problem. This, sort of, unexploded bomb, which you weren't having to expecting to have to deal with.

UKICE: You must have spoken to Theresa May about Europe well before the referendum was going to happen. Did it ever cross your mind that she might campaign to leave?

CW: I think that she felt the whole thing was a bit of a distraction. I mean, she's not a politician who was ever motivated by the issue. And so, like quite a lot of people, felt somewhat ambivalent. She certainly felt that she hated the Home Affairs meetings that she had to go to in Brussels and that they were, sort of, deathly at times.

But I never felt that she would campaign to leave. You know, she always pragmatically – not with a huge amount of enthusiasm, but pragmatically – felt that we had to be around the table. And that meant staying in. And I think her softly spoken stance during the campaign was a political tactic rather than a suggestion that she didn't really know where her loyalties lay. She was always on the pragmatic remain side. In all the years, I've known her – I started working for Theresa in 2000/2001 – I'd never really heard her express a view about Europe, particularly. It just wasn't high on her political agenda.

UKICE: Was Theresa May's experience and knowledge of the European Union fundamentally shaped by her experience dealing with the justice and home affairs opt-outs?

CW: I think it's a fair argument to make. Certainly, you know, later when we were in Number 10 and dealing with some of this, you could see that some of that experience was rubbing off on some of the language she would use. So, it would shape the elements of the European Union that she didn't like – as I said, just now, she would quite often talk about these, sort of, deathly Home Affairs meetings that she had to go to, and the process of the opt-outs and everything that had been through. You could see that language filtering through later on. So I think, if not wholly true, it's a fair argument to make.

UKICE: As a Conservative strategist, did you think that the renegotiation was well conducted and gave David Cameron what he needed to launch a winning campaign to stay in?

CW: The renegotiation was always just a bit of a sideshow really. I was involved in the very early days of the Remain campaign before it became the

Remain campaign. So back in the days when Laura Sandys and co were meeting in Lord Sainsbury's boardroom and starting to scope out what a campaign could look like. What always surprised me was the fact that the prevailing narrative was, 'Well, we have to, sort of, wait to see what David Cameron comes back with in terms of its renegotiation, because that is what the referendum is going to be about.'

And, of course, the referendum was never going to be about what he came back with in terms of the renegotiation. It was just a process we had to go through to get to the referendum. For me, that was that was one of the key strategic mistakes that was made at that point. And it was frustrating. So in terms of how the re-negotiation went: it's interesting, I think he also did quite well. I don't think it was a bad package of things. But I think it was also slightly irrelevant to the main question. And that was the problem.

UKICE: Chris, doing the renegotiation, he had to position himself as being prepared to argue against continued UK membership, which you could argue put him on the back foot because he'd made that thinkable? Were you worried about that?

CW: I suppose, in the sense that it fed a bit more of the Euroscepticism, yes, but I just think that by that point, positions were becoming entrenched. And so this renegotiation was going on, but it felt a bit like a phoney war. The questions were more fundamental than that. And focusing on the renegotiation too much was a distraction. Maybe that was the main problem with that process.

UKICE: Should the Remain campaign have made more of an effort to try and make it about that, if only slightly? There was no effort on the part of Britain's Stronger in Europe, to trumpet what he'd achieved.

CW: Which is interesting given where they started, because they took the view they didn't really want to launch the campaign until he came back with the renegotiation. That was going to be the jumping off point. So I'm not, sort of, sure how that mismatch happened but, you know, the point is the referendum campaign, in my view was not really about Europe and therefore the re-negotiation was not... You know, you can communicate the details of it in parts. But actually, is it going to move anyone's vote? I'm not sure. I think the

evidence at the time suggested that people weren't going to be going through it line by line. It was much more visceral and emotional than that. And that was the game you had to engage in.

UKICE: Were you surprised when David Cameron said that the Government machine wouldn't be campaigning as it had done in the Scottish referendum, which you were in Government for as Nicky Morgan's special advisor? Did that surprise you? Do you think he was unnecessarily hampering himself?

CW: My fundamental view is that the Britain Stronger in Europe campaign was one of the main contributors to the fact that people voted Leave.

But in answer to your question, yes, I think that was a weak position to take for the Government, not to have a view. But, actually, you ended up in the worst of all worlds, which was you spend all this money pushing out this leaflet through doors and you allow that to be characterised as a piece of propaganda and it fed into this slightly haughty narrative about the campaign as a whole.

So you've got to do one thing or the other, but to pretend you're sitting it out and then mobilise Government resources just basically says: 'These guys are trying to stitch it up. It's the elite against the people, etc.' It completely played in, I think, at that point to the Leave narrative. So, yes, I think it would have been better for them to take a clear position.

Entering Number 10

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Was there a settled view inside Theresa May's Downing Street about what had caused the vote to leave? And what the mandate it gave her was?

Chris Wilkins (CW): Settled view, wow. As close to a settled view as there was amongst the top team was the well-rehearsed argument about change versus no change. When I got to Downing Street in August of 2016, we quickly needed to come to a view.

And the view we came to was that it was a vote for change in the country and a whole host of other social and economic policies, not just our relationship with Europe. If you look at the language she used in her main conference speech

that year, she talked about this quiet revolution.

And that was the view about what had happened. That it was people who had – after so long being ignored and not listed to – used this as an opportunity to hit back. Europe was part of it, but it was more what Europe represented and the way Britain had conducted itself in Europe and what that signified about their relationship with the Government. So it was seen as that broader vote for change amongst the top team in Number 10, and that was a view that Theresa certainly shared.

UKICE: So how were decisions being made in Downing Street? Who was influencing the Prime Minister at this point?

CW: The thing that I identified fairly early on in my time there was that there was one meeting that mattered, which was the Wednesday afternoon meeting in the Prime Minister's study, the Brexit strategy meeting. And this would typically go on for an hour.

It would be about 10 or 12 people in the room and it was led at that point pretty much by Ivan Rogers in the early days, alongside Olly Robbins, then obviously later, Tim (Barrow). And so that was the formal structure as it were. If you wanted a voice in the conversation, you had to get yourself into that meeting, which I did.

The meetings were interesting in terms of the conversation. So Ivan already would table a paper and, you know, we would spend an hour discussing that paper. And quite often it turned into Nick (Timothy) being on one side of the table and the officials on the other, and Theresa would quite often, sort of, referee a discussion between the two sides of the table. And we would join in, Jeremy Heywood obviously was the key to it with his knowledge. He was a prominent voice in those discussions, as well.

But though the meeting was good, it wasn't a decision-making forum. At the end of the meeting everyone would say, 'Well, thank you. That was interesting. We need to give this some more thought,' and everyone would shuffle away.

And the decisions – it was slightly unclear at what point they were made and

how. But they really manifest themselves in speeches. So, I was then at the receiving end of the chain as it were, as the chief speechwriter. I'd be handed a final paper or, you know, a brief by one of the Chiefs of Staff or by Jeremy (Heywood), and then I'd factor it into a speech.

So there was certainly, I guess, a disconnect. Firstly, it was very interesting that David Davis wasn't in those meetings. And the view very much of DExEU (Department for Exiting the European Union) at that point as expressed to me on a number of occasions was that their job was not to run the negotiations. DExEU's job was to prepare the UK and the legislation for leaving the European Union.

It was a domestic mandate, not a negotiating mandate. And I think, also, on reflection, I subsequently realised that actually there were a lot of informal advisors feeding into some of the decision-making processes, particularly some of politicians in the Conservative Party like Bernard Jenkin, John Redwood, Iain Duncan Smith, people like this who I would quite often see trooping into meetings in Number 10 that I wasn't part of. And a few external advisors as well, chipping in. But, you know, I think it's fair to say that ultimately, as is no surprise to anyone, Nick (Timothy) was probably the most prominent voice in the whole debate and decision-making processes.

UKICE: You seem to be suggesting that some of these Conservative politicians might have had more influence than some of the people she had around the Cabinet table?

CW: I think they influenced... I think they had access to the Chiefs of Staff at the time. I think that had an impact. I mean, there was of course the separate Cabinet sub-committee and, you know, that was where Liam (Fox) and David and people had a prominent voice. But to be completely honest with you, it wasn't clear. Theresa would make a great thing about a return to Cabinet Government when she took over. It wasn't particularly clear that actually that functioned terribly smoothly. I don't want to do David a disservice because Theresa and David Davis got on very well and she did listen to David and she did respect him for his point of view. But he wasn't necessarily in the formal structure in terms of that Wednesday meeting: he could influence around the edges, but he wasn't in the room when those discussions were happening.

UKICE: Of course Olly Robbins at that stage was his Permanent Secretary. So did you get a sense of what role Olly was playing, then? He had an EU-Sherpa official lead negotiator role, and as David Davis' Permanent Secretary. Did you get a sense how he was playing that role?

CW: It was very strange that. I mean, I always, in those meetings, certainly thought he was being the PM's Sherpa. And to be honest, that's how he was seen. When he was in Number 10 in meetings or anything else, he was, I think, regarded as the PM's person and not the DExEU Permanent Secretary..

UKICE: It's interesting, Chris, that you haven't yet mentioned the word 'immigration'. The assumption is easy to make that actually her whole Brexit policies stemmed from her view about immigration and the need to end free movement. Was that not part of the debate post referendum, in the lead up to the Tory Party Conference?

CW: Immigration became the defining driver of Theresa's Brexit policy, and the reason why is because of what the whole immigration debate represented. I said earlier that the vote to leave was seen as this quiet revolution, a call for change, and the fact that politics couldn't go on as it was any longer with a certain group of people running politics in Westminster and frankly ignoring what people in the country wanted. Now, the one policy area where that was clearer than anywhere else was immigration policy where for years it'd be high up on the public's agenda, they were being very clear about they wanted immigration policy to look like. And, frankly, Westminster had just not listened and done the opposite. And so the reason immigration policy became so important to Theresa was because of its totemic status as the pinnacle of this disconnect between politicians and the public. And so the whole thing of ending free movement was key if Brexit is to mean anything. And it did become the prism through which the policy was set.

Party conference to Lancaster House

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): The first of the public outing for Theresa May's approach to Brexit was the party conference. So, would you like to talk us through how you went about constructing that speech and whether it was seen as setting the trajectory in the way that, in retrospect, it was seen to?

Chris Wilkins (CW): Yes, it was the Sunday of party conference. Now, actually, I didn't have a huge hand in that speech itself, but I was responsible for setting the framework for the party conference.

We had a discussion leading up to the event itself about whether the Prime Minister needed to say something on the Sunday or not. Traditionally, as you know, the Prime Minister doesn't speak until the very end, so that would have been the Wednesday. But as a new Prime Minister, she needed to stand up on the Sunday and say something to the party and take ownership of the conference. There was a tactical decision made that actually she needed to make a speech on the Sunday because she had to take control of the conference and the party in a sense; remember, she hadn't been elected actually by the party. She hadn't been out to the country and had she been, had that contest gone on to a vote, it might've been different. But having not done that, she needed to stand up on the Sunday and say something.

So that was the first decision and I was involved in that decision. Having taken that decision, what's she going to talk about? Well, she's got to address Brexit. I mean, it'd be silly to stand up on the Sunday and talk about anything else. So you've got a tactical decision that then leads to this big moment with what became the big Brexit speech.

And to be honest, I mean, it became – in retrospect – a big moment in the whole, sort of, Brexit strategy and the discussions. But certainly, when the speech was drafted and I think when she delivered it, it was not intended to be a big strategic moment and certainly not the big deal it became. I always regarded the start of Brexit, effectively, to be the Lancaster House speech in January. And it was only later that I realised that people were looking back to this speech on the Sunday of the conference being the seminal text, as it were.

That was not the intention. And I think when she stood up to make that speech she felt like a lot of it was just the statement of the bleeding obvious. It wasn't really supposed to be something that was going to blow the doors off or be treated in the way it was in Brussels. You know, the country had voted to leave. She was standing up and stating some things that were quite obvious about what that meant. And so I think the response to that speech in Brussels was a bit of a surprise.

UKICE: Some people have said that speech effectively ruled out the customs union, but that the Prime Minister didn't really appreciate that was the import of what she'd said there. Do you think that's a fair criticism: if she'd shown it to officials first, maybe they could have warned her against some of the positions she was taking?

CW: I think there's fairness to that criticism, if I can put it like that. But what I would say is that basically this was a political party conference. This was a political speech, and it was a curtain raiser to the party conference. It wasn't supposed to be a big announcement about Brexit itself. You know, even in the Lancaster House speech in January of the following year, people always say Lancaster House ruled out a customs union. Well, it didn't fully and quite deliberately, it didn't. So these things weren't, thought to be pre-judging policy outcomes, but they were showing the direction of travel, which as I say, was seen as being something of a statement of the blinding obvious, given the way the referendum results had gone.

UKICE: Members of the Cabinet claim to have been surprised by what was in that speech on the Sunday. Was that not communicated back to the Prime Minister? And secondly, if my memory is right, it was after that Tory conference that she first met the European Council. I think it was about a week after that. And was there any realisation that the message she delivered on Brexit combined with what Amber Rudd was saying about potentially registering people coming over here, would create a certain mood in the room of the European Council?

CW: To be completely honest with you, I think there was a real disconnect. I'm not avoiding your question, but I'm going to deal with the second bit first because the Amber Rudd thing is really interesting. So we went into that conference with a clear strategy of what we wanted to get out of it.

And the conference is now remembered for other things and one of the reasons for that is the Amber Rudd Home Office immigration announcement, which nobody knew about before it was made. It was not supposed to be a key announcement at all. And even 24 hours later, we were still trying to figure out where it had come from.

And I think we discovered it was buried in a footnote in a press release or

something, because it wasn't a planned announcement. And I think that coloured the way a lot of this was seen. But, the point is a fair one. I suppose we were slightly looking at it through a different frame at the time. We were new in Number 10, we had this conference bearing down on us, we had to quickly get speeches together for conference, quickly decide the person who was going to speak on the Sunday because that was the tactical thing to do.

If she's (Theresa May) is going to speak on Sunday, she's got to say something about Brexit. So you write a speech about Brexit. But, as I say, what you're not seeing is a big announcement of Brexit policy? This is just a reflection of where we've been since the referendum, and signalling a direction of travel while not trying to pin down any specifics.

UKICE: The thing that it did was pin down the timing of triggering Article 50. Was there a lot of thought that went into that March deadline, which some people thought was very unwise and basically handed the EU one of our strongest cards straight away?

CW: There were two calculations that went into that decision. One was about the party and how long could we go on without triggering Article 50 before the party started to revolt, particularly as they were, you know, likely to be slightly suspicious of a PM who'd been on the other side of the argument.

But the reason March became the deadline was because of the European elections coming down the track. Basically, March was the latest you could leave without having to commit the UK to taking part in the European elections, two years hence. So that's why March became the date that was set.

Was there a huge discussion about it? Not really. In the days leading up to it, a senior official from DExEU, who I knew, came to me in my office and put the argument to me just as you've said, that this was one of the key cards we held and we should not give this away. And was there anything I could do to stop this happening? I promised to take that view to a meeting, of officials. So not a meeting the PM was in, but I did take that view to a meeting, in the study, on the first floor of Number 10. And I laid out the argument and said, 'You know, an alternative would be to stand up and say, 'because I want to get the best deal for Britain, you know, my message to Europe is that, I will not trigger Article 50 until such time as it's in Britain's national interest to do so''

And I think I probably lasted about 15 seconds before everybody else in the room – and this was civil servants, as well as political advisors – just said, ‘That’s not a sustainable position. We can’t go beyond March because the prime minister will be basically torn apart.’ That was probably the end of that, really. I see the argument, could that have worked? Could we have held it longer? I am quite sceptical about it, to be honest. I think you had to get on with it.

UKICE: Do you think the Prime Minister ever believed that no deal was better than a bad deal?

CW: Er... No.

UKICE: Maybe, Chris, you’d like to give us a bit of the thinking behind what you were trying to do in Lancaster House. Do you want to talk us through how we got from the party conference in October through to Lancaster House in January?

CW: So, yes, I suppose it is interesting looking back on it. As I say, having not appreciated then that the party conference speech had fired the gun on this, we decided in December that we would have to address the issue first thing in the new year. And we started work then on a ‘Big Speech on Brexit’, as we called it. A speech that was originally going to be delivered on, I think, the first Friday back. And was going to be delivered from the top floor of Canary Wharf, originally. Nick undertook to do the first draft alongside the PM over the Christmas period. And when we reconvened after the new year in Number 10, we looked at where it was and felt that it certainly needed more time and more drafting. So, we then postponed, and it was done later in the month.

But one of the things we looked at, at that point, was the fact that it needed a broader framing. The original draft was ... I would describe it as quite narrow in its framing, really. And I felt we needed something that was much broader, slightly more domestic, (coupled with) the whole idea of ‘Global Britain’.

The framing was developed out of that and actually was born out of some of the polling and research that we’d done at the time. And, in particular, framing it in the broader terms of the ‘Plan for Britain’. The Plan was supposed to ultimately be the big, strategic thing, which didn’t last long.

But Lancaster House was the first run out of that. So Brexit was not just a vote to leave the European Union but a vote for fundamental change. And the framing was broader in that sense. But what we then tried to do in the actual speech was lay out priorities and principles – five principles and 12 priorities or something like that.

But the language of that was important. Lancaster House laid out these 12 priorities, but priorities signal the direction of travel. They're not saying 'These are the 12 things we're going to achieve.' You're basically setting out the broadest possible framework, which allows you then movement and compromise. That's sort of the point of it.

So Lancaster House did, I think, a few things. It set out, hopefully, the optimistic view of post-Brexit Britain, and where we were heading. It laid out the framework in terms of the priorities, the 12 priorities, but it also used some generally quite emollient language towards the European Union. And Nick and I were the main drafters of it. We spent, you know, many hours sitting in the chief of staff meeting room in Number 10, working through the narrative about, kind of, why this hadn't worked, why Britain had left, why our relationship with Europe was different and more complicated.

And that was quite an interesting process, actually, and we spent a long time in that opening section of the speech really trying to explain to Europe why this had happened and why we'd taken this decision and why they shouldn't be angry or upset about it, and actually that we wanted to make it work.

And I think the language was much more emollient in that sense. But to come back to the point about priorities. Priorities are important because priorities are saying, 'this is what we want to achieve'. They're not saying, 'these are red lines'. And what happened, subsequently, was that we were forced into publishing a white paper because parliament made us do it.

So the priorities – they're not supposed to be red lines, they're supposed to be priorities. When we were forced to publish the white paper, DExEU basically published a slight re-cut of the Lancaster House speech. But they changed the language critically from priorities into principles. It became 12 principles and I then spent weeks – one of my jobs in Number 10 was to clear all the press releases that went out – and I spent weeks changing press releases from

principles to priorities.

UKICE: A department can't publish a white paper that Number 10 disagrees with fundamentally? Was that not spotted in Number 10?

CW: I don't remember seeing the white paper before it was published because it was supposed to just be, as I say, a distilled version of the Lancaster House speech. So I don't know where else in Number 10 it went at the time to be honest. But that was a frustration on my part, that that happened.

UKICE: Very interesting. Was the Lancaster House speech a proper collective, all the Cabinet bought in, effort? And did you run it through embassies and people like that to say, 'Is this going to land well? We've invited the ambassadors sit there and listen to it?'

CW: So I'll try my best to remember the process. It was held quite tightly, as you would expect a speech of that nature, for a long time. So it was held in Number 10 and we had obviously Olly Robbins feeding into it, Jeremy Heywood was feeding into it. And I can't actually remember, was it Ivan or Tim at that point, I can't remember who was there. And then it was shared in hard copy form with members of the Cabinet the day before. And they fed back comments in manuscript form onto a hard copy that was then given to me to reflect on and we worked through with the PM which of those comments were taken on board. One of the particular instances I can remember about that was the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, said that the language on the customs union should not rule out a customs union. The language was very, very carefully, worked through with Philip to make sure he could live with what was said at that point.

So that was the process. In terms of embassies, I can't remember. I certainly wasn't involved in a process with embassies. I can't remember if that happened elsewhere from the building, through the private office, which it may have done, but I'm afraid my memory fails me, at that point

UKICE: And one of the things you said in that speech was there would be no hard border in Ireland. Did you work out at that stage what that would really mean?

CW: I can't remember the issue of Ireland and the border really being discussed prior to Lancaster House. That was one of the first times I remember it being part of the conversation, and there wasn't a big discussion at that point about what that priority actually meant in practice. So to be clear the answer to that is no, there wasn't a big conversation. But what I do remember generally is that we set these 12 priorities and one of the virtues of them was that actually they were seen as all being relatively achievable because some of them were quite vague.

It's interesting. I think the Lancaster House speech was very constructive. We were really pleased with how Lancaster House landed. We had calls from people on the centre-left of the Tory Party and centre-right of the Tory Party all praise it. We thought it landed quite well in the media. We were going to follow it up with op-eds into the main European papers, in main member states as well. But that unfortunately didn't happen for, well frankly, practical process reasons that just didn't work very well. And I think had they landed, that would have been useful. But I remember, yes, we were genuinely quite pleased with it. I think now people look at it slightly differently than they did at the time.

UKICE: Following Lancaster House, why did you go to court over Miller?

CW: Do you know what? I don't know. I kept saying, 'Why are we doing this?' I genuinely can't explain the reason to you. I think partly it was a personal thing. Certainly, legal counsel, the Government Legal Officer told us that we had a reasonable case, so that encouraged us.

But to be honest, I never understood it. I can remember now having a conversation with somebody in Number 10 saying, 'Why are we continuing to fight this? I just don't understand why we're expending effort on it.' One of the arguments was put forward by Jeremy Heywood, who said that, 'The way these things go is that you'll be negotiating right up until one minute to midnight and if you've always got to go back to parliament, they were never going to give you the best deals first time around.' And I remember that discussion happening in one of the morning meetings with the Prime Minister.

But I always thought this was a waste of time and a strange thing to be fighting.

The 2017 General Election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): So, as we move up towards the triggering of Article 50 in March, had an election been mentioned, however indirectly? Had the conversation started?

Chris Wilkins (CW): The election conversation started quite late on. It was only really, probably just around the start of March that many of us independently, sort of, came to the realisation that an election might be necessary. And then we tentatively started mentioning it to each other and it went from there. So, only quite late on in the process we started talking about the possibility of an election and there was certainly one plan. And probably, in a sense the best plan, was to announce the election the day that we triggered and to go for it straight away, because we wanted the election to be on the same day as the local elections. That was the idea.

So, if you announced it on the day we triggered Article 50, then you could do that. The fact that didn't happen is reflective of the fact that we had only just started talking about an election and it was all quite late and we might not have time to make that happen. But it was certainly not part of the plan, no.

UKICE: The Prime Minister, when she called that election, said the rationale was that she needed a solid parliamentary majority to get her Brexit through, yet she'd come off having this massive parliamentary vote for triggering Article 50. Was she really worried about the electoral calculations then?

CW: Yes. So, there are a few things here. So when Theresa said that the reason we're having the election is to get the majority in order to get Brexit through – I think that was a bit of an artificial construct to some degree. And that wasn't the original thinking of why we were having an election.

Originally, the election was supposed to be basically centred on the fact that you had a Prime Minister who'd taken office without a vote amongst the public or a vote amongst the party, who had a clear mandate in taking office to trigger Article 50 and honour the referendum result, but not really a mandate for anything else. And if you interpret the referendum result as being about more fundamental change required in the country, that means a different set of policies than the ones in David Cameron's manifesto. Ergo, you need your own mandate and your own manifesto. So that was really what the election was about.

But that said, there was a calculation, which was that on the existing timetable, there would have been a general election planned in 2020, and we would be negotiating with the European Union up until 2019. And that was thought to put us at a disadvantage because they would just basically wait it out or wait for the election to happen. So, part of the calculation was certainly shifting the electoral timetable, to give yourself greater time to get the negotiations done.

But I think the broader point that was made – ‘give me a big majority to get Brexit done’ – was not really part of the original strategy and not really what we wanted the election to be about. And, indeed, had you said to me in March 2017, ‘Let’s have an election and let’s make it about Brexit,’ I would have said ‘No, you’re mad. That’s a crazy thing to do.’ But I ended up losing that argument, so there we go.

UKICE: What were the pro and anti-camps in the Government on an election?

CW: On calling an election, there were very few people who were anti it. I can’t really think of anyone who spoke out against it. I mean, David Davis was in favour of it and was pushing the idea quietly behind the scenes. Philip Hammond was pushing the idea and I think when the Prime Minister announced it at Cabinet, people genuinely all thought it was an excellent idea.

I’m trying to think of anyone who spoke out otherwise, but I can’t recall there being anyone who’d taken that view at the time. It was universally thought to be a good thing to do. Not universally, but anyone who expressed a view accepted it was a good thing to do. The argument was over the framing and the timing, not about the principle, I suppose.

At the time we had done so much polling. We knew exactly how to frame the election, but critically we knew exactly how to position the prime minister in the election. And we had a clear strategy for what we were going to do with her. And none of it was about making the election campaign all about her. None of it was about sending her around the country on a bus with her name on it. And none of it was making it a personality contest and not a policy contest.

And, unfortunately, in the campaign, I remember Nick saying to me, ‘The point is that Theresa is a good campaigner, but what campaigning is, is walking up high streets talking to people, handing out leaflets, traditional campaigning.’

That's what she loves doing. That's when she's in her element.' And that's what we wanted to do. In the end, the way the Prime Minister was positioned in the election campaign was an utter disaster and, you know, could only have been dreamt up by people who had no interest in reading the polling or any of the focus group evidence we had developed over many months.

UKICE: Was there a concern about being seen as opportunistic for calling it after she'd ruled it out? Were you ever concerned about that?

CW: Yes. So there was definitely a discussion about that. In fact, that was one of her main concerns when we pitched the election to her, when we had an evening drink in her flat in Number 11 and took the election idea to her. One of the main objections was precisely that. But to which the argument was that we felt that actually the way you frame the election could reinforce her qualities.

If she had stood up and said, 'Yes, I have to trigger Article 50, but I think all these other things need to be done to the country, but I don't have a mandate for that so that's why I'm putting my job at risk to ask for a mandate,' that would have reinforced what people were saying about her at the time, which was that she was a different kind of Tory, she was a different kind of politician and she had some integrity. So that was the pushback on the opportunistic thing. Frame it correctly and, you know, you'll actually get respect for doing it. But we framed it otherwise. So there we go.

UKICE: What are your recollections or your assessment afterwards about how that election was handled?

CW: I think there were two key errors, but they're both big errors. In a sense, the error for which I'm happy to take my part of the responsibility is that when we missed the opportunity to call the election so it could be held on the day of the local elections, we should have canned the whole idea.

Not having it on the same day as the locals was a disaster and having a seven week campaign, which was the natural consequence because of the way the electoral timetable then worked, was a disaster. This was supposed to be a snap election, held on whatever it was, 4 May, or something when the locals were. And if we'd pulled that off, the result would have been very different.

The moment we missed the opportunity for that, we should have cancelled it. And we didn't and that was an error. But having decided to go ahead, I genuinely think the strategy that was used for the election was completely wrong-headed and completely ran counter to months' worth of polling and opinion research that we had done to get us to a point where we had the confidence to call it in the first place.

And, you know, I suppose I could have been stronger and done more and shouted and jumped up and down a bit more about it but, you know, I was overruled. I just think in the end the strategy was a fiasco. And it just wasn't true to Theresa May as a politician. It might have worked for someone else, but not for her. Then, rather gallingly, Boris Johnson ran, I think, a fairly similar strategy in 2019 to the one that she should have run and he did rather well. So there we go, who'd have thought?

Reflections on Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Do you think post-election that an opportunity was missed to recalibrate the approach to Brexit?

Chris Wilkins (CW): I do. Yes. It is very difficult and it is easy to say with hindsight, I suppose. But I don't know how you could look at that election result and say the message the country is sending us is that they really want a really hard Brexit. I mean, that's incongruous and flies in the face of the evidence that you've got before you.

So, you know, what I would have counselled and had I stayed around longer, I would have tried for, was actually pretty much to try and relegate Brexit as an issue, make it more consensual, more cross-party and for the Prime Minister to spend rather more time focused on other issues, which people clearly did care about, in terms of domestic policy.

But, you know, on the night of the election, amongst other things that happened, not long after the exit poll came out, you know, let's put it like this – a senior pro-Brexit person in the party looked at me and said, 'Oh my God, I think we might have just screwed Brexit. I really think Brexit might not happen now.' That was the main priority at that point for people in the Conservative Party. They got around the PM and my belief is, I think they said to her,

basically, 'You can stay as long as you drop everything else and just make our version of Brexit happen.' I think that's what happened. It stemmed from a fear that the whole thing was about to come crashing down and that the party would never be forgiven, at that point. So that was the decision that was made.

UKICE: You said just then, 'their version of Brexit', are you saying that the kind of more cross-party consensual approach, and perhaps a softer Brexit, was simply impossible? She couldn't have held on to the premiership, if she'd gone that way?

CW: I think that's my view. I mean, I can't point to direct evidence of that, but I think that's exactly what happened was that basically a deal, maybe not in formal terms, but basically it was, 'You can stay as long as you see this through.' And that is what then subsequently came to pass.

UKICE: So coming back to those people and saying, 'Well, look, I can do Brexit. I can drop everything else. I can do Brexit, but we're going to have to do it differently to the way that we envisaged we were going to do it,' that wouldn't have flown?

CW: It was their version of Brexit. But, I mean, where I would give them a bit of, sort of, credit, I suppose, is that they would say, 'There is no such thing as a soft Brexit. Basically, people who talk about soft Brexit want to stop Brexit happening.' And, you know, there's been a fair bit of evidence of that over the past two years that suggests that maybe they had a point. So a big driver of hard Brexit was not just the ideological thing, but that actually the only way to make it happen against this opposition was to really go for it. Because the moment you show weakness, the whole thing falls apart.

UKICE: Chris, one of the things that we do know about Theresa May is that she's a pretty committed unionist. How much was that a preoccupation in Downing Street when you were there to make sure that this wasn't putting additional strains on the union and maybe giving another card to the SNP, for a potential IndyRef II?

CW: Well, that's a really interesting question because it was a big priority. Theresa always talked about the importance of the union. You know, she made a point of talking about the Conservative and Unionist Party, the general

election manifesto had Conservative and Unionist Party on the front cover. In the aforementioned plan for Britain, one of the essential pillars of that was a united nation, which was all about the importance of the union and bringing it together, etc.

And we also felt that we dealt with the SNP agitating about the referendum and independence rather well with the 'now is not the time' line. And we thought we had that under control. So, at a macro level, it was important and it was something that, you know, you're absolutely right, that Theresa felt in her bones that is the most important thing, which incidentally is why she would never go for a no deal Brexit.

But what's interesting is that it doesn't necessarily translate into the way that you deal with the devolved administrations. And I think there's a whole other discussion here about the way devolution works and the way the whole administration works. But, basically, I can remember there'd be times when the Prime Minister held one of the meetings with the devolved administrations and they'd come down to London.

And, you know, we would say, 'Well, we know how this goes.' Nicola Sturgeon comes in, they have a meeting, and then she walks outside and she stands outside the door of Number 10 and she beats us up because that's what she does. And there's nothing you can do about it and it's just a game that you have to go through.

So in a sense, that process wasn't taken that seriously because there didn't seem to be that much you could actually do about it. They're just always going to complain and always going to beat you up because that's how the game works. But behind the scenes there was the union that was a real consideration and an essential part of this, and something that Theresa was particularly impassioned about.

UKICE: Was there a potential tension between a hard form of Brexit and maintaining the union?

CW: Yes. Yes. But, the view was not that you solve that by, I guess, policy solutions but more by campaigning, communications and messaging solutions. Certainly the view was, if you started talking about a soft Brexit, then Brexit

would never happen. You could start out talking about hard Brexit and end up with a soft Brexit; that was a reasonable journey to go on. But the overall consideration was you had to make Brexit happen and sell that as a concept. Yes, the SNP would not like it or in Wales, etc., but that was a secondary thing in a sense that, you know, you could win that battle over time.

UKICE: Do you think it's fair to say that Theresa May worried too much about a particular faction of her party?

CW: Yes, I do think that's true. And I think the example of this was the way the Cabinet was formed and the constant juggling act and balancing act of who was where in the Cabinet. Which I thought was a rather slightly silly way to do these things.

Theresa, very early on just said that it wasn't what she'd voted for, but people voted for it and therefore it had to be delivered. And, you know, it was just a basic democratic thing, but that was the rules had been set up. The decision was clear. You had to get on with it. So I don't think she was always calculating that her political advantage was best served with placating the right of the Tory Party, but she did think that this thing had to be seen through and whatever else happened, she had to see it through and she thought that they were her most likely allies in achieving it.

And she'd get frustrated with people on the other wing of the party who just couldn't see that there was a basic democratic principle here that had to be adhered to. And that was one of the biggest things for her, actually. She would get very frustrated when people tried to reverse the decision because people had voted. If you see the whole thing as basically people rejecting a Westminster elite who are ignoring what people want, the very worst thing to do is to not deliver on the referendum result.

And that's the central thing I think people need to understand about Theresa. That point.

UKICE: Did Theresa May basically just decide Brexit was a political choice and therefore the economics was secondary, or quite how did she think through that? Because at this phase, there was talk of the Treasury under Philip Hammond not playing the role you might expect them normally to be playing?

CW: I think she thought that a lot of those people were trying to fight the last war. They should have won the referendum, shouldn't they? And they didn't. I'm not being flippant, but the point is that, yes, that was a concern, but I think she thought some of it was slightly overblown.

But more to the point, you know, the democratic principle was absolutely key and it overrode all that sort of stuff. Philip Hammond used to constantly say, you know, 'No one voted to make themselves poorer.' And I used to think, 'If that's your starting point for analysis, you're going to end up with the wrong conclusion.' Because, actually, I think some people did. Because it's not all about economics. There were other things that people were voting about and, you know, people were voting about the future of their kids and that sort of stuff. So it was just a different way of, sort of, seeing the discussion, in a sense. Coming back to the point about the campaign, it was all about the economic impact. Well, it didn't work because there are other things that are, sort of, more important than just- Theresa saw it in slightly broader terms, I think, and that's why those arguments didn't land very well with her..

UKICE: Can I just take you back to, 'no deal is better than a bad deal'. Do you think that was a strategic mistake on her part in the sense that it let the genie out of the bottle for some people in the European Research Group?

CW: I suppose if you look at what transpired, then yes. I think what maybe hadn't been calculated at that point was the extent to which that (no deal) would hold up the whole thing. So it should never have got to a point where no deal was a possibility, really, because the House of Commons should have come together and just seen this – a sensible Brexit – through, because that's what people have voted for.

But that didn't happen. So you ended up at a point where, actually, the hardliners tried to hold onto this no deal scenario. So maybe it was. I mean, I remember a discussion around that line at the time with Lancaster House and there was a discussion about whether it should be in there or not. And the view was that it was something that you had to say. David Cameron had refused to say it and look what had happened to him. And, therefore it was something you had to put in there, but it was in there in a speech that was generally, I think, quite emollient and positive most of the time.

UKICE: The Conservatives electoral coalition has changed since December and the nature of the Conservative Party itself seems to have changed. Is that where you now see the future of the Conservative Party?

CW: I think I see the future of the Conservative Party being there for the immediate future, but I'm not sure for the long term. I was always very, very concerned about the Conservative Party turning into the Brexit Party. I thought that, delivering effectively a hard Brexit would likely lead to immediate electoral success and long term electoral difficulty.

So I was resistant to the idea of it happening. I think the jury is still slightly out on the longer term, because I think Keir Starmer is a much more effective leader of the opposition than the person he replaced. It may yet be that we have secured a great victory by promising to get Brexit done. But, we may have sacrificed some of the ground – if I can call it that – with more liberal voters over the longer term.

So the answer is, I think it's too early to tell but it was always something I was very concerned about. You had to keep as broad a coalition as possible. I think Boris Johnson managed that in December, pretty well, but he managed it because he was up against Jeremy Corbyn. The next election will be much more difficult. I know Keir Starmer has got a large mountain to climb. But electoral mathematics, I think, is so volatile these days that anything is possible.

UKICE: Do you think that throughout the way Theresa May approached Brexit, she was conditioned by the need to compensate, maybe overcompensate for having voted Remain in 2016?

CW: Well, I think there were two questions there. Would a genuine Brexiter have been able to do things differently? Yes, quite possibly. Had Boris Johnson taken over then, he would definitely have more room to manoeuvre. I think the fact that Theresa had been on the Remain side of the argument influenced some of the tactical stuff she did and some of the language she used.

I don't think it necessarily influenced the policy per se because as I say what it comes back to for Theresa – who's not a particularly calculating politician and

never has been – is the democratic principle of people voted and therefore that's what had to happen.

And that ties into the speech she made at conference which was, to her mind, a statement of the bleeding obviously which met democratic principle and that's the thing guided her through it all. So I think some of us maybe at times overcompensated and used language and terminology that maybe come across as quite harsh. But I'm not sure the policy would have been different because that was the thing that was driving her.