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Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster July 2014 ...

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The Coalition Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Were you involved in David Cameron's decision to announce a referendum? What did you make of it when you heard he was going to make the Bloomberg speech and commit to a referendum?

Oliver Letwin (OL): I was very much involved in the discussions leading up to it.

UKICE: What thinking went into it?

OL: A lot of this has been documented in various memoirs, including my own. The essence of the reason why David (Cameron) decided to do that is we had concluded that there was going to be, in all likelihood, a referendum come what might. Whether this was the right judgment of how the politics would go or not, we'll never know — it's counterfactual.

It looked very much at the time as if the Conservative Party was not going to be able to get an overall majority on its own, particularly if it failed to promise a referendum. Under those circumstances, a Conservative Government, if it were able to be formed at all, might have depended on a UKIP alliance of some kind. That would have forced a referendum, but on somebody else's terms. Therefore, it seemed better to take charge of the situation.

Maybe we were learning the wrong lesson from the past. Who knows? But we were operating on the basis of we had essentially concluded in the coalition days about a Scottish referendum. The argument then was that Alex Salmond was going to hold a referendum in Scotland whether we wanted him to or not. Therefore, we thought we might as well make it a lawful and proper referendum in Scotland and be able to regulate it properly via the Electoral Commission and so on and so forth.

Similarly here, it just seemed inevitable there would be a referendum. Therefore, better to make it our referendum. Of course, once you've made that commitment, not as a hypothetical, you have to honour the commitment if you win the ensuing election. You have to remember that David had already made long, long before a hypothetical commitment to a referendum when in Opposition. The commitment was made explicitly on the basis that the Lisbon Treaty would not be ratified by the time we got into office. Of course, in the event, the Lisbon Treaty had been ratified by the time of the 2010 election — and our hypothetical commitment was therefore null and void. Nevertheless, as a matter of history, there had been before 2010 a hypothetical commitment that if the Lisbon Treaty wasn't ratified by the time we got into office, we would have a referendum. This 2015 decision was in many senses a repeat of that, but under different circumstances.

A lot of odium had been incurred that first time around as a result of people saying, 'You said you were going to have a referendum and you didn't.' They were not noticing (or at least were pretending not to notice) that we'd very specifically said before 2010, 'We'll have a referendum if the treaty hasn't been ratified.' This time, in the lead up to the 2015 election, it seemed obvious that the only way to persuade people to take the commitment seriously was to make it unconditional. We couldn't say, 'We'll have a referendum unless we're in a position where we're not forced into having a referendum,' or something of that kind. That wasn't going to work. So David announced a referendum.

UKICE: Was the inevitability as you saw it down to Conservative MPs in Parliament putting pressure on you to do that? Because there was a rebellion, wasn't there, on the idea?

OL: There was strong pressure inside the parliamentary party, as you say,

clearly. You have to remember this was a time when there was an option for those MPs who were of that mind to do what they were doing and to defect to UKIP. Indeed, it had become clear they could win their seats in by-elections having defected. There was every prospect that — in the absence of a referendum on Brexit — we were not going to be in a position to command a parliamentary majority, even if we'd won an electoral majority in 2015. If you see what I mean.

There was also a very distinct possibility — I think it was actually a strong probability — that, in the absence of a referendum commitment in the lead up to 2015, more MPs would defect, and more of the defectors would win their seats in by-elections. Moreover, under those circumstances, it was likely that UKIP would do extremely well in those seats, in the ensuing election, and would be in the enviable position (from its point of view) of being a power broker.

We didn't think it likely that the Liberals would do especially well, even if we didn't predict they'd do quite as badly as they did do at that election. As everybody knows, it looked more as if (Ed) Miliband at the tail end was going to be in a better position to form a minority government than we were. Everybody was predicting that the Conservative Party was going to have a devil of a time getting an overall majority. All the predictions were wrong. But you can't do politics on the basis of knowing the future in advance, you can only guess at it.

UKICE: What about the idea that you would have negotiated away that promise, had you been obliged to go into another coalition with the Lib Dems? Is that something you thought was possible?

OL: I can't speak here for anybody else. What, at any rate, I thought was likely to happen was that, if — having made the promise — we weren't able to form a majority administration, but if the Liberals had done reasonably well and we had done well enough, we might just be able to form a new coalition with the Liberals. It was actually an outcome, I'm now speaking purely personally, which I regarded as quite constructive. I thought the Coalition Government was an excellent government.

I thought we had very decisively disproved a thesis that I'd previously held that coalition governments were unstable and difficult to operate. I think we'd found means of operating effectively — admittedly partly because of the contingent

circumstances of people running each party who were rather of a similar mind, which doesn't always happen. Nevertheless, I think we proved that you can run a successful coalition government.

I think in running the coalition there had been a lot of constructive negotiation about a whole series of things. While we didn't always get to where I'd have ideally liked to get to, we always got to a position that had been moderated by a serious internal debate. It was a workmanlike way to do government. Moreover, we commanded a majority in the house and we could generally make what we had decided come true.

Personally, I wasn't at all averse to the idea of another such coalition. I certainly did assume that if there were the need for another such coalition following the 2015 election, a condition of that coalition would be a demand from the Liberals not to hold a Brexit referendum during that Parliament. Whether the Conservative Party would have been willing to sign up to a coalition on that basis, only counterfactual history will tell you; we never faced that. I don't know.

I certainly expected that's what the Liberals would demand if they were to form a coalition. Indeed, I had prepared documents ready to sign on that basis. Of course, we never came to negotiate it. We never came to find out whether the Conservative Party would agree with it. It's all a what if.

The renegotiation and the referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): I just wondered how involved you were in shaping the terms of the referendum, the legislation that was developed. Were you part of any of that thinking?

Oliver Letwin (OL): I wasn't intimately involved in any of that. I certainly sat at some meetings where some aspects of that were discussed. No, the precise design of the mechanics of the referendum I was never involved in.

UKICE: If you come onto the referendum campaign itself, I'm assuming you weren't that involved in the renegotiation.

OL: No, it's the other way around. I wasn't involved at all in the campaign. I

had no part in the campaign, I was busy minding the shop. I was however involved in the renegotiation. Not of course in the face-to-face negotiations, which were conducted at a high level by David and then by sherpas – Tom Scholar and so on. I wasn't involved in any of that. But I was very involved, always involved, in the discussion of what came back from those negotiations and which steps we should take, which steps we shouldn't and what we needed to secure.

UKICE: What did you make of the final package? Did you think that met your negotiating objectives, that it was enough to give you momentum?

OL: Two separate questions. As I've tried to sketch in one of my books, I'd been a very long term Eurosceptic. One of the original Eurosceptics right back in the days pre-Maastricht. I wrote in the mid-80s a pamphlet called 'Drift to Union', which advocated trying to work towards a situation in which there was kind of inner circle of European countries that were gradually becoming a 'United States of Europe', and an outer ring of countries, like ourselves in a free trading relationship with one another and with the inner core. I thought there were quite a number of other countries in parts of Scandinavia and East and Central Europe and so on that might find life in the outer ring attractive, as I thought we would. In other words, I wanted to be part of the Single Market, but not part of an emerging United States of Europe.

Obviously, we weren't part of Schengen or of the euro, but in addition I wanted not to be part of a series of other things — in particular, the inevitable long term fiscal consolidation, being part of the monetary union, the European army and all the rest of it.

My Euroscepticism was of a kind that was rather boringly consistent right back to the late 70s and early 80s. It always seemed to me that the common market, the Single Market, was a good idea and beneficial to our trade and standing in the world. But the apparatus of central control from Brussels that was leading towards an emerging European state, while maybe very suitable for some other European countries, wasn't ever going to be acceptable here. Being part of the Single Market without being part of the emerging European state continued to be my long-term goal.

I didn't realise the number of my colleagues in the Conservative parliamentary

party, who had in some cases not been nearly as Eurosceptic as I was back in the late '70s and '80s, that had way overtaken my position by 2015, and had got to the 'we must get completely out of all of this forever and have nothing further to do with it' position. I didn't realise this — and I'm still not completely clear (even though I've since looked into a bit) exactly when or exactly how this happened.

As a consequence, I don't think I was nearly sufficiently aware that a negotiated settlement, that seemed to me entirely appropriate, wasn't going to fly with a number of colleagues whose position had become much, much harder.

However, if you're talking not about whether David's negotiated settlement would fly in the UK, but whether it was in my view a good idea, that is an altogether different matter. I strongly held the view the things we had negotiated would achieve, slowly, progressively, in all probability, exactly the result I desired.

I thought they'd put a break on further integration and shift the relationship subtly, but very importantly, between us and the European Court of Justice, which I regarded as the main issue. I also thought the negotiated settlement, if implemented, should gradually tilt things towards a position in which other countries sought similar constraints on their relationship, and thereby gradually begin to provide the basis (over a decade or two) for those countries that weren't part of the euro and had gradually developed equivalent treaty changes to club together as an outer ring, which is where I wanted to be.

So, if you're asking me not was this something I thought would fly, but was this something I thought would do what was needed if it did fly, the answer is abundantly yes, I thought it would. I was very sorry that we didn't seem to capture any of this during the referendum campaign, which I personally didn't play any part in directing. We didn't seem during that campaign to make a positive case for that outcome. I don't recall anyone in the course of the campaign having an argument about whether that sort of outer ring idea was a good idea and whether this mechanism would get us there. It was all in terms of, 'should we be in or out'?

Again, one can't rewrite history and find out how it would have gone if the

Remain campaign had been conducted differently. I persist in suspecting that if, instead of appealing to the people who were diehard Europhiles (which is where it seemed to me our side of the referendum campaign was heading), we had simply assumed that those people would vote not to leave anyway, and had troubled ourselves instead with the people who were in my sort of position of moderate Euroscepticism, and had tried to appeal to them by saying 'This agreement isn't perfect and isn't going to produce wonderful results tomorrow, but it's a path to a position that might really be very convenient for the UK', I continue to suspect we might have won.

UKICE: Why weren't you involved?

OL: We'll never know. That simply wasn't how the campaign was conducted. I suspect there were probably various reasons to do with my own ineptitude as a campaigner. I also suspect one of the reasons I was kept out of that campaign was precisely because people suspected that was the sort of argument I would be making.

UKICE: You said you were 'Left at home, minding the shop' in the Cabinet Office. A lot has been made of the lack of preparations for any sort of contingency in that period. Is it true that there was no preparatory work going on in the Cabinet Office, or was some of it going on away from the eyesight of the Prime Minister during that period?

OL: No. Of course I didn't rush around with a microscope investigating what was on the desk of every official in the Cabinet Office, as that wasn't my relationship with our officials. But certainly, my whole experience and my daily discussions with Jeremy Heywood and others in the machine led me to believe, to trust, that we were all doing what David had asked us to do — namely, not to get the machine to assume defeat in the referendum campaign. This was on the grounds, as indeed has turned out to be true, that there would be plenty of time to work out what to do next if we lost, and that we should therefore focus on trying to run the government as well as possible in the meanwhile, which is what I was involved in doing during that time.

We felt we must not forget that we had been charged by the British public with running the country properly. As long as we were doing that, we felt we could let the people involved in the campaign get on with the campaign. Then, when

we got to the end of it, we would be able to see where we were. And if we'd lost, then someone would have to work out how to deal with that situation at that point.

I think David was right about that. I don't think it would have made the slightest sense to sit around assuming we're going to be defeated. Obviously, it makes very good sense to plan for contingencies that might hit you suddenly — because you won't have time to do all the planning after they hit you. But if you're doing something that's going to take years and years to unfold, there's plenty of time to deal with it if and when.

UKICE: Did you anticipate defeat?

OL: Did / anticipate defeat?

UKICE: Yes.

OL: No, not at all. Just before the referendum campaign began in earnest, as you may know, I spent a considerable amount of time at David's request trying to persuade Boris (Johnson) to support remaining. I certainly thought that our failure to persuade Boris to support Remain constituted a danger. I thought, and still think, that he was a brilliant communicator, publicist and campaigner, so that was a blow.

It was obvious (Nigel) Farage was a formidable campaigner as well. Their message, even before they fined it down, it was very clear. Whereas our message was a great deal more complicated. Indeed while we are at it, as I say, I came increasingly to the conclusion watching the campaigns unfold that ours was also not quite the right message. We were neither making as much as we should have done of the advantages of the negotiation, nor making it as clear as possible where we would end up positively if we did remain with that negotiated settlement.

Nevertheless, despite all of those disadvantages, partly because I thought people around the country were conscious of the significant advantages of being part of the trading bloc, and partly because I was reading the opinion polls — any politician who tells you they don't pay attention to the opinion polls is an egregious liar — I thought it was looking okay.

Indeed, the night before when the last polls arrived on the scene, I remember having a very jolly evening thinking the dust was going to clear and that we would be able to resume business as normal, implement the negotiated settlement and maybe move towards a two-ring Europe over time. And that all seemed to be wonderful. When the results started coming in, I was bitterly disappointed and quite surprised.

UKICE: Why don't you think Boris could be persuaded? Even by someone as persuasive as yourself.

OL: No doubt partly because I'm not sufficiently persuasive. For the rest, I don't know. I've never been quite sure really whether at that time Boris was actually totally committed to the idea of leaving, or whether he persuaded himself, so to speak, during the referendum campaign. He was in an undecided state of mind about which was the better course of action.

I certainly believe that a certain part of that was due to the fact he thought his position in the Conservative Party would be stronger if he was in favour of leaving than if he was in favour of remaining, even if the Leave side lost. I've never really quite been able to tell. Every human being is a person who has mixed motives. I've never quite been able to disentangle which motive was governing what.

Governing after the referendum, June-July 2016

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we move onto the day after the referendum or just the immediate aftermath when David Cameron stood down. He asked you to set up the embryonic preparation unit with Olly Robbins coming across to take over from Tom Scholar, I think, to head it up. What did you do in that interregnum period before the conclusion of the Conservative leadership contest?

Oliver Letwin (OL): This is all really quite interesting in retrospect. The first thing is David had decided — against my advice, though actually I think he was probably right and I was probably wrong — that he would resign. It was clear, however, that it would take some time for the party to choose a new leader and hence to have a new Prime Minister.

Therefore, it wasn't sensible to do nothing in the interim and somebody needed to get preparatory work underway so the new Prime Minister coming in would, to the extent possible, have a structure and have the beginnings of preparatory briefings, ideas and so on. I was asked to do that work and was very willing to do it, obviously.

The first question I came across was who should we have to direct this work in Whitehall? David and I concluded, I think right at the beginning, I can't remember exactly when but very early on, that the obvious person to do this was Olly Robbins. It is a matter of some slight historical irony that when I got hold of Theresa (May), who was then Home Secretary for whom Olly (Robbins) was working and said we would like to borrow Olly, she was pretty resistant to this idea at first because she thought he was doing a fine job at the Home Office, which indeed I think he was. It tells you quite a lot about how life works. She did give way, not altogether willingly. She became an enthusiast for the proposition only once it became clear that she was likely to become the next Prime Minister.

UKICE: Why Olly? Olly had very few European credentials, so why was he the obvious person to entrust with a detailed negotiation with the European Union?

OL: Partly for that reason. That's to say, this was a new mode. All those people who had been negotiating had been negotiating as part of a member state negotiating with other member states about the things that happen inside a club. Once you shift the mode and you're trying to negotiate the manner and result of leaving, you don't want to be doing that in the same idiom as the normal negotiations within the EU. It's a different kind of thing.

Somebody who was somewhat fresh seemed good. You wanted somebody who was enormously able in the sense of being able to marshal very large amounts of material, organise things very well, write things very clearly. Also, you wanted somebody who had a large amount of experience in dealing with Britain's international relationships. That was Olly Robbins. He seemed to me the obvious person.

In any event, it wasn't just Olly, there were lots of us involved. I did really quite a lot of work during that period. It became pretty apparent to me at that time that the likelihood of a successful outcome in any sense, that's to say, the

likelihood of achieving what it was that Britain ultimately decided it wanted to achieve out of those negotiations, was much greater if it was a bipartisan or even tripartisan effort.

The reason I concluded that, was that it seemed to me very likely this was going to become extremely charged politically as we moved forward. If on the other side of the Channel one lot of people from Britain were saying one set of things to them and another lot of people were saying another lot of things to them, at best this would be confusing and at worst defeating.

It seemed to me that the way to have a unified negotiation with our counterparts, who were clearly going to make it as unified as they could by providing one clear mandate for the Commissioner and doing all the other things that did happen on that side of the Channel, was to have a bipartisan or a tripartisan approach within the UK.

Secondly, it seemed to me it was only by having a bipartisan approach that we could hope to defeat those who were ultra Remainers (and were therefore going to hate any negotiation for leaving and would try to frustrate it), as well as those who were very hard Brexiteers (who were not going to want any kind of serious negotiation about anything because they just simply wanted to be out full stop with no compromise of any kind about the future relationship). The only way to keep those two groupings under control was to have a solid phalanx of 400-plus members of Parliament who were joined in a single pursuit.

I held some meetings with people in the Opposition — the then Opposition. We discussed how one could try to make this a cross-party approach. I also began to investigate with people from the Treasury and elsewhere the fundamental issues, which have received incredibly little attention since in public, about things like data adequacy rulings and equivalence rulings: the things that really affect the fundamental economic relationships that we have to the EU in relation to the 80% of our economy that's services.

I also began to look at the different approaches. I studied the Canada free trade deal very carefully. I also looked very closely at the EEA and EFTA arrangements. Olly was beginning to create a structure. We were beginning to sketch out some of the substantive issues and we were beginning to have

preparatory discussions with people in other parties to see how one might make a smooth cross-party operation. Of course, other than the structures Olly had produced, it came to nothing because when Theresa did take over her view was quite different about how you did these things.

UKICE: Did you come up with the structure to have a Department for Exiting the EU and a Department for International Trade?

OL: I didn't have anything to do with the idea of the Department of International Trade. That was formulated under Theresa. Nor did I propose a DexEU. Whether it was going to be actually a Department for Exiting the EU or whether it was going to be a very large operation within the Cabinet Office hadn't been decided by the time I left; but it was clear it needed to be one or the other. Olly effectively needed to become a Permanent Secretary of something.

UKICE: Interesting. That suggests if you were having talks around the lead option of where you might land would be towards the softer end of the Brexit scale, rather than towards the Canada style. Is that right or had you not got that far?

OL: My view was there were two plausible and economically sustainable positions. One was Canada Plus and the other was Single Market Minus. Exactly where in that we came to rest I hadn't formed a view about. It seemed to me we needed to explore both.

We needed to explore what were the likely negotiating dynamics around each and find out also which was the more likely approach to garner the kind of cross-party consensus I was hopeful we might get. It seemed to me one could wend one's way towards something that would be a unified smooth transition to a different relationship. Now I'm in no doubt it was all of that thinking in part that led, you'd have to ask her, but led Theresa to think it was an urgent necessity to be rid of me.

I should explain, I did explain all of this initially to all the prospective leadership. I had conversations with Boris and Michael Gove, when they were in alliance still. I had conversations with Theresa, I had conversations with Andrea (Leadsom) and so on. As it narrowed down, I focused inevitably on Theresa

and Andrea. They were well aware of how I was thinking about it. Evidently, it didn't find favour.

Joining the backbenches

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Then you were out of government and Theresa May has taken the reins. Then we have a series of things where she starts to set out the tactics, in terms of the timing of Article 50 and her red lines at the party conference and at Lancaster House. She also gets into this row with Parliament through the backdoor over contesting the Miller case and saying she's going to use the prerogative.

What did you think when you were sitting there watching all these things unfold? Did you have confidence this was going to go well and this was the right approach, or did you have cause for concern?

OL: One has to disentangle these things. On the prerogative question, I had received before I left office categorical advice, unusually categorical advice, from the then-Treasury Solicitor that this was to be done by the prerogative power. I didn't question that. I was entirely surprised when Gina (Miller) managed to win her case.

I didn't think it terribly mattered either way, in the sense that I always thought it was obvious there would be a massive majority in Parliament for triggering Article 50. It therefore didn't seem to matter terribly whether the government did it without asking Parliament or whether it did it by asking Parliament and getting Parliament's approval. It was going to happen anyway. Nevertheless, as a technical matter, I was surprised that it didn't get done via the prerogative. I'm not a lawyer and I had no basis for knowing what the position would be. But, given the categorical advice, I was surprised it turned out that the case went the way it did.

I rather think that the reason the case went that way was an odd one too. Neither of the contesting sides questioned an assumption I think is obviously false. They both said, and therefore the judges took it as read and said they took it as read, (perfectly reasonably as both of the protagonists were taking the same view), that the decision to trigger Article 50, once made, was irreversible — and that triggering Article 50 would therefore lead to an

irreversible loss of rights for UK citizens, and that such an irreversible loss of rights could be imposed only by an Act of Parliament.

Manifestly, however, the triggering of Article 50 was not in fact irreversible and therefore it manifestly in my view was not actually an irreversible abrogation of rights. Therefore, the basis on which the judgement was made was not well founded.

Whether it was the correct judgment nevertheless, i.e. whether it might have been made on some other grounds, I don't know. All I know is that the grounds on which it was in fact made were manifestly false. But because they were agreed by both sides, because each side had a reason for saying that triggering Article 50 was irrevocable, the judges didn't contradict the position taken by each side.

It's one of the oddest cases in our constitutional history. I can't think of another case in which a manifestly false assumption is presented to the court by both sides. The court rules on the basis of the manifestly false assumption and we therefore have a precedent set for our constitution, which is probably one of the most ill-grounded ever made. There we are. It was as it was. As I say, I don't think it made the slightest practical difference.

The thing that alarmed me at that stage, and continued to alarm me throughout Theresa's stewardship of the matter, was that it became clear to me at the very early stage, and became clearer and clearer as we went through, that she took the view it was necessary if at all possible to avoid the very thing I thought it was necessary to promote, namely cross-party governance of this issue.

She was very determined from the very start that the Government would govern, the Opposition would be the Opposition. Normal relations would prevail and on that basis the thing would be done. In principle, a perfectly respectable argument. I can quite see how she came to this conclusion. But it seemed to me the wrong way to go.

It was of course an argument that briefly looked like it was better than I had at first feared, when her popularity soared and when she managed, completely contrary to my expectations, to persuade Jeremy Corbyn to agree to an election in 2017. But, alas, she then managed to conduct the election, or have

it conducted partly for her by others, on the most catastrophic basis of any general election campaign in our recent history, and thereby turned a latent, massive victory into an actual near defeat.

Of course, as soon as that happened, I assumed she would reverse her position and accept that it was necessary to have a bipartisan approach. It was a perfectly arguable thesis that the Government should govern, and that if it should be able to secure after a year or so a massive majority, it could continue to govern as the Government and let the Opposition say things from the Opposition benches, but otherwise have not much influence on the matter. But once you've not got an overall majority to speak of, or one that depends on a peculiar alliance with a particular other party in Northern Ireland with their own interests, you would have thought — I would have thought, indeed I did think — that it would be absolutely required to have some cross-party agreement to proceed.

Whether by that time it would have been possible to get cross-party agreement after the 2017 election, I don't know. Anyway, she didn't try. My level of anxiety about the lack of bipartisan governance of the matter increased from considerable to extreme at that point.

UKICE: On the substance, were you worried she was boxing herself in with the party conference speech and with Lancaster House?

OL: No, I was less worried about that. The proposals that she and Olly had developed were certainly opaque and rife with ambiguities which would have taken months and months to sort out after the Withdrawal Agreement had been reached. Nevertheless, they seemed to me to represent a perfectly sane approach to organising our future relationship and the method of departure.

They'd clearly been devised as a matter of balance between Philip Hammond, on the one side of the argument, and the ERG on the other side of the argument. They seemed to me a very respectable balance. If she had organised sufficient cross-party support for them, I think they would have done very well.

It's not necessarily a bad thing to have a high degree of ambiguity about the future, as well as a great clarity about the transition — and that's what the

emerging document provided. I was very happy to go along with that and support it. I was just very worried that she didn't seem to me to have the parliamentary majority organised to do it.

My whole effort at that stage was to help, as far as I could. On various occasions I think I did play some small part in knitting together the various parts. She wasn't willing to do a deal with anyone on the other side of the chamber. The issue was, could you patch together people on the Conservative benches? I did my best to help broker peace accords between warring factions inside the Conservative parliamentary party in support of her deal. I tried to persuade the most ardent Remainers to not press things so far as to alienate the ERG and vice versa.

It was actually quite enjoyable. It was a time when I was actually getting on quite well with people across the Conservative parliamentary party because I was trying to facilitate accord. However, history shows I wasn't ultimately any better at doing that than I was at persuading Boris to help with the Remain campaign. We all know the sequel.

UKICE: Who was more persuadable and flexible, the ERG side or the Remainers, or were they both as obturate on occasion as each other?

OL: No, actually I wouldn't describe it that way. I think at that time as we led up to the initial act, not the triggering of Article 50, but the initial Withdrawal Act, there was a good deal of spirit of cooperation. It wasn't at all impossible to get people to agree. As you know, up to that time there was a significant adhesion. We passed that bill pretty comprehensively, got it through the Lords and so on.

It was once the transition agreement was presented that this began to break down. At that point there were a very small number of Remainers who were unhappy and wanted to vote against Theresa's deal. But there was a much larger block of course of ERG people. The way I would put it is that, starting from a position of willingness to compromise and cooperate, positions hardened during the series of discussions and votes on that agreement that never was — the transition agreement that never got consummated.

UKICE: Having been supporting the Government while Dominic Grieve is

putting down amendments to try and secure meaningful votes or whatever in December 2017 and then July 2018, we have you down as rebelling for the first time on 4 December 2018, when you backed a Dominic Grieve amendment to ensure the post-meaningful vote motion was amendable. What triggered you to, not quite cross the floor, but to move into the other camp?

OL: We're now much further along. By that time, I'd come to the conclusion, first, that there were considerable numbers of ERG members who were irreconcilable. I didn't share the Chief Whip's optimism that they could be brought around. I didn't think — and I think by that time I knew enough to be pretty sure that I knew what the number did look like — that there were enough Labour MPs who were going to vote for Theresa's deal to get it through against the number of ERG MPs that were going to vote against it.

I therefore got extremely worried for the first time that we really were heading towards the situation in which the choice was between no Brexit and no deal. I didn't think either of those was a plausible way to keep this country together. It seemed to me we just had to have some other route than either to rat on the British public's clear decision to leave, or to leave without a deal.

One has to remember, it was very different to the question we've been facing the last few weeks of whether to have a trade deal. This was a question of whether we were going to leave millions of Brits stranded in European countries without any rights and vice versa. Whether electricity and gas systems would be able to work properly and on and on. There was a tissue of crises that would have been generated by leaving without a transitional arrangement, because there were all sorts of things you couldn't do. Not the high-profile trade deal things that are now at issue, but a whole series of practical issues that nobody has ever been sufficiently concerned about, but which have now been, in a perfectly workmanlike way, sorted out in the last year. But you couldn't sort out those things until we were a third party. You had to have left in an orderly way in order to have the standing as a third party to negotiate and organise those things.

I got very worried that we were in a position where Theresa wasn't willing to find common ground with the Opposition. The Opposition was increasingly unwilling to find common ground with Theresa. The ERG wasn't willing to find common ground with Theresa and she wasn't willing to find common ground

with them, except if they were willing to vote for her deal. I could only see all around me positions hardening to the point where we were going to be faced with the cataclysmic choice between two evils, not leaving or leaving without a deal.

UKICE: Did you ever think she was really going to go for no deal or do you think it might happen by accident?

OL: Yes. By that time, I concluded that almost everything that was happening to her was happening in a way that she didn't want and wasn't planning. I didn't think she was in control anymore. I thought there were forces that were way beyond her capacity to control.

Therefore, although I was absolutely confident she shared my analysis it was a very bad idea to leave without a deal, I thought it was entirely possible she would end up leaving without a deal because she couldn't find a way of not leaving without a deal, except not leaving, which she couldn't do either. It seemed to me we were in a very bad place.

The first time in my entire parliamentary career that I voted against the party whip was on that occasion. I hadn't ever even abstained. I could be counted on to vote for things that I very much disliked, because they were the things the party was doing and I recognised that a party is a coalition of interests and views.

If you want to have an influence, you have to have an influence through a party. Other than exceptional individuals, a single person can't do anything of any interest in Parliament. I've always accepted that the penalty of that necessity for parties was that, from time to time, my party would want to do things I didn't want to do. Even as a member of Shadow Cabinets and Cabinets, I loyally voted for things I didn't agree with in the greater cause, so to speak.

But at this particular moment, I thought the nation was faced with a really severe risk. The party and the government had got themselves into a position where they weren't going to be able to deliver a reasonable solution. I thought we really did absolutely have to have the opportunity to try and break that deadlock. I couldn't see any way of doing that other than by opening it up to

some kind of cross-party discussion within Parliament. As the government had lost control, I thought Parliament was in a better position to try to achieve something. That's why I rebelled on that occasion. Of course, there were implications of that in the succeeding year.

UKICE: How much pressure was put on you not to rebel?

OL: Not much. Part of my hope was that by taking this action, maybe this would dislodge some of the ERG-ists. They would feel that actually, they were generating a position where they couldn't just steamroller the rest of the party into leaving without a deal. I don't know, but I suspect that in the governmental high command there was probably at least a partial feeling that that might be the case. That people like me rebelling, who were not the usual suspects, had not ever rebelled before, might bring the ERG round a bit, maybe a long way.

Certainly, I didn't receive phone calls from Theresa asking me to rebel. I don't mean that at all. By the same token, I didn't come under any pressure at all. I rather had the sense it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. They didn't like rebellions, but on the other hand they could see that it might have some useful purpose.

Cross-party politics, March-October 2019

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You said that you thought the Government was failing and Parliament could have a go. One of the manifestations of that you could say were the indicative votes. I wonder what your expectations were going into those, and your reflections on that process.

Oliver Letwin (OL): My main reflection of course is that it didn't work. But I think we were right to try. We got reasonably close to getting to the point where there was a majority in favour of something. It was Ken Clarke and Helen Goodman who got closest with their customs union proposal. Ken, with whom I had many discussions over all of this period, was very, very clear that this wasn't in itself an operable proposition. But he very plausibly hoped that it would precipitate a whole chain of other things — and that gradually something might emerge which could command support on both sides in sufficient numbers to get a deal. I may have been unique. I literally voted for everything. Any solution that could achieve a majority seemed to me better than any

solution that didn't achieve a majority. Then we'd have a basis for working towards a transition that actually had a parliamentary majority behind it.

But other people were very picky. There were still people who thought if they voted against everything, they could get a second referendum. There were people who thought if they voted against everything, they could get a no deal Brexit. There were all sorts of reasons why people voted against things. There was so much voting against whatever wasn't people's first preferences that there weren't enough people voting for anything to make a majority.

UKICE: Could you have designed a process that would have forced people to choose? Some people suggested if people had to number their preferences, eliminate them or something like that.

OL: We all discussed all of that, we analysed that to extinction. I don't actually think there was any other process that would have succeeded because, in the end, the way a parliamentary democracy works is that there has to be a positive majority in favour of a proposition. It's no good there being something which if people were allowed to express their second preference they would be willing to vote for, but which actually when it came to it, they wouldn't vote for. It doesn't do. You can't make law that way in our Parliament.

There was another process which I thought was much more likely to succeed than the indicative votes. Indeed, I didn't believe the indicative votes were ever going to be any more than indicative. I didn't think they would in themselves move smoothly towards a law that would resolve the issue, I wasn't that naive. I thought, rather, that if one could get to the indicative votes, get to an indicative vote that was a majority, one might actually provide a basis for the Government and the Opposition to sit down and try and implement that in an agreed fashion.

As it turned out, much to my delight, even though there wasn't a majority for any indicative votes, the process in another sense did work. Namely, it precipitated serious discussion for the very first time. It was the first time since I had discussions in the Cabinet Office in 2016 that there was actually a serious set of discussions between serious people in the government and serious people in the front bench of the Opposition. I had meetings with both sides of that discussion, quite a lot of meetings and quite a lot of conversations that

weren't meetings with each side, and with other people who were also speaking to the participants in those discussions.

A great deal of groundwork was put into trying to make sure, on the part of those of us who were pretty well informed about the two positions, what was actually at stake. We tried to make sure that each party to those negotiations knew what were really the bottom lines of the other side, in an effort for them to be able to consummate some deal that didn't cross the red lines of either side. There were moments when I became very optimistic that was exactly going to happen.

Unfortunately, I think the dynamic within each political party, and in particular the dynamic of the two leaders, ultimately made it impossible. If it had been David Cameron and Ed Miliband or John Major and Tony Blair... you can think of all sorts of pairings where probably that would have led very late, much too late, two years later than it should have been but nevertheless, would have led to a cross-party consensus, which probably then would have become the solution. But it wasn't to be.

UKICE: Before that you had your own bit of cross-party action, the famous Cooper-Letwin process that led to the passing of the bill stopping that. Do you want talk to us a bit through that?

OB: The other concern was simply time. There was this juggernaut heading towards a great big brick wall. It was pretty clear to all of us who were trying to find some compromise solution that if we simply relied on the indicative votes process and/or a process of discussion between government and Opposition, it was altogether possible that time would run out and, because of this dreadful clock ticking under Article 50, we would by mistake leave without any kind of transitional agreement.

The question arose, how do we make sure that can't happen? That it only could happen with the approval of Parliament? That Parliament would have a last chance to forge a compromise or a consensus rather than discovering that by mistake we'd dropped out without a deal? That's what gave rise to a whole succession of efforts, the Cooper-Boles efforts and the Cooper-Letwin bill, which eventually became an Act. Indeed, later on the Benn bill, which again became an Act.

There was a sizeable group of us across the parties who were sitting and talking. It's more or less happenstance whose name was on which Bill, because we just worked out who would do the next bit. They were all efforts tending in that same direction to try simply to ensure that before the country left without a transitional agreement, Parliament would have had to face up to that and would have had to vote in favour of it.

UKICE: When we move through, we've got Theresa standing down and replaced by Boris Johnson. Then the idea, coming into the autumn, of prorogation being mooted first by Dominic Raab during the election campaign and then picked up at the end by Johnson. Do you want to talk us through your reaction when the government announced that prorogation and the series of events of that led to it?

OL: This was perfectly rational in terms of those who were determined to keep the prospect of leaving without a deal, without any transitional arrangement, alive. Just as we who wanted to make sure we didn't fall by mistake into leaving without a transitional arrangement were keen to provide a roadblock to that happening through legislating the necessity for a parliamentary vote.

Those who were on the other side, Dominic (Raab), Boris and so on, who wanted to maintain the flexibility to leave without a transitional arrangement at any moment they chose, obviously didn't want Parliament doing what we'd done. They didn't in particular want us to renew, so to speak, the effect of the Cooper-Letwin.

It didn't take much imagination on their part to spot that if Parliament was up and running in the autumn, we would find some means of doing what we did do, which was to pass the Benn Act.

There was a majority in the House of Commons at that time in favour of the idea of giving Parliament the right to prevent the country leaving without a transitional arrangement.

Therefore, we just needed to find the parliamentary means of crystallising that majority. If we could do that, then we could pass what became the Benn Act. This was evident to the Government. Therefore, I suppose, (obviously they didn't tell me, but I suppose) it became a natural consequence for them to

think, 'How do we deal with that situation?' And one obvious way was to make sure that Parliament wasn't sitting.

I didn't take this possibility very seriously because I thought the idea that a government which had come into being without a general election, not backed on this issue by a majority in Parliament, would seek to prevent Parliament from expressing its majority view by the expedient of having Parliament not sit, was a civil war tactic, a 17th Century tactic, which was unlikely to appeal to a modern government in a liberal democracy such as ours. How wrong I was.

I was coming towards the end of my holiday in the Alps when I was contacted and told that they intended to prorogue. It's been a matter of continuing surprise to me. I suspect this was part of the genius of Mr (Dominic) Cummings.

I could see entirely their logic of seeking the prorogation, though I didn't believe it was constitutionally proper. But then they made the evident tactical error of arranging things so the prorogation occurred after a number of days of sitting.

The idea that they would prorogue after giving time for Parliament to do what it needed to do to achieve the effects we wanted, rather than the effects they wanted, struck me as bizarre. I suppose it arose from the fact that Mr Cummings didn't believe we knew what we were doing procedurally. Anyway, we did.

Therefore, actually winning the prorogation case, Gina's second case, though I think extremely important for constitutional reasons, never became a material factor. Incidentally, in that case there was no question of the two sides putting forward a false hypothesis and the case being judged on the basis of that false hypothesis. In terms of the background assumptions stipulated by both sides, it was a perfectly straightforward case. But of course the question of the scope of the prerogative power was a very vexed issue, leading different courts to different conclusions. Ultimately, the view of the highest authorities, the supreme judicial authorities both in England and in Scotland, was very clear and was extraordinarily lucidly expressed.

I think it is very important that we do not now have a precedent for

governments, at any time they don't happen to like what Parliament is up to, to say 'goodbye' for indefinite periods. But actually, from a practical Brexit point of view, it didn't make two hoots of difference. Because in practice, we had the Benn Act in place before Parliament was prorogued — before it was prorogued and before it was unprorogued.

UKICE: The Government of course then threatens that it won't pay attention to the Benn Act. Did you actually believe that sabre rattling?

OL: No, I never took that seriously. It seemed to me there was a distinction between constitutional experimentalism, if I can put it that way, and breaking the law. You could see this very clearly in the response to the Supreme Court ruling. The Government didn't actually say what would have been absolutely unlawful, namely, 'The Supreme Court has ruled, but we're not paying any attention to it.' It said 'On the constitution, the Supreme Court has ruled; fine, we accept that.'

Geoffrey Cox, who is a serious lawyer, was very clear as he was on many occasions, very honest and very clear. He said, 'I don't agree with this judgment, but the judgment has changed the law because it's a judgment of the Supreme Court, and the Government obeys the law.'

I thought that was very clear. I didn't think he, the other law officers, the senior legal advisor to the government or a number of responsible and serious ministers would condone the breaking of the law, no matter how many crazy suggestions some people within the Number 10 apparatus might make. I just didn't think it would happen.

What I was worried about was something quite different, which was what indeed they tried to do. That was to perfectly lawfully negate the effect of the Act by having a vote in Parliament, which satisfied the Benn Act, but wasn't followed through in an implementation of that vote in a transitional arrangement. It was of course well nigh impossible to explain to anybody in the media how this all worked.

As you know and as I know, the whole point of the so called Letwin amendment was simply to prevent the Government having a vote that negated the effect of the Benn Act. I thought it was very likely they would try to negate

the effect of the Benn Act in just the way they did try, and that's why we had the amendment prepared.

UKICE: Two things slightly prior to the Letwin amendment that Saturday. Were you surprised to be expelled from the Conservative Party summarily for supporting the Benn Act?

OL: Not particularly. By this stage I had a fairly residual attachment to the administration. I didn't think it was behaving in a responsible fashion on the major issue of the day. I was finding it increasingly uncomfortable sitting on the Conservative benches. The fact that the Government found it increasingly uncomfortable having me sitting on the Conservative benches was just a mutual acknowledgement of the situation. I must have been the most frightful nuisance from their point of view — I can quite see that — and so were my colleagues.

I also looked around me and felt I was in pretty good company — people who were very longstanding, very loyal and very senior members of the party, who had acted as significant parts of many Conservative administrations over a very long time. I thought I was where I wanted to be. When we were all chucked out, I thought: that's made a few things simpler.

UKICE: Did you ever step back and think, 'How on earth has it come to this,' did you have those moments? Two or three years before you'd been at the centre of government, and now you were out of the party. Emotionally, that can't have been completely easy. Intellectually, I can see what you're saying.

OL: The bit that was difficult emotionally was not that bit. That was in many ways, as I say, just a simplifying and release. The bit that was emotionally difficult was that I didn't at all enjoy being in opposition to friends and colleagues of many years. There are some people who make a parliamentary career out of being pugilistic; that's not my preferred mode of action, I'm a peace seeker.

I really enjoyed working with colleagues all the time. I enjoyed putting coalitions together and I even enjoyed from the back benches facilitating compromises. All of that was fine. But being surrounded by people who were very cross with me wasn't at all pleasant. In fact, it was very unpleasant.

I felt that the sooner I could get out of the House of Commons the better, at that point. If I hadn't found myself in this ghastly position where I thought I had some kind of moral duty to try and stop all this happening, I would just have left. The fact of being summarily dismissed was therefore neither here nor there. It simply acknowledged a position which had already built up. The unpleasantness was what led up to that.

UKICE: Were you surprised, Oliver, when Boris Johnson concluded the deal he did with the EU?

OL: Once the amendment was passed and the Benn Act therefore was back in, he couldn't leave the EU without either a transitional arrangement agreed by Parliament, or an explicit vote by Parliament to leave without a deal. That was our whole intention in passing the Benn Act and in protecting it via the amendment.

Boris knew as well as I did that he wasn't going to get a majority to leave without a deal. If he wanted to leave, which he did, he had to have a deal. He was simply following the logic we had created. I wasn't at all surprised he did a deal because what else could he do?

UKICE: That deal with the provisions on Northern Ireland that Theresa May had in not quite the same form, but said no British Prime Minister could ever accept. Did that surprise you?

OL: No, because my view was that the minutiae of what's in treaties was never of very great interest to Boris. The issue was, were we leaving or not? By effectively making the backstop a frontstop, it was no longer a backstop. Honour was satisfied and there we were.

UKICE: You've got the Letwin amendment, the Prime Minister has written his letter, but then he tries to railroad his bill through, his Withdrawal Agreement bill through, in the dying days of October. Were you surprised at Number 10's tactics then, when the bill passed second reading but the timetable motion failed, to withdraw it and say, 'We've got to have a general election now.'

OL: Yes. It was very evident that the whole effort of the administration over some previous weeks had been to precipitate a general election to get out of

this bind. On various occasions, it had been unclear whether the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and Jeremy Corbyn were going to agree to a general election or not. There were a lot of discussions about these things going on.

I was never sure from day to day how the dynamics inside the other three parties were going to work vis-a-vis a general election. Until that moment, until the time when the government's motion was put forward and the Letwin amendment was debated and so on, the Opposition parties had not agreed to a general election.

Once the amendment was passed and therefore the Benn Act was in place, was effective, it was clear there couldn't in that Parliament be a move by the government to leave without a transitional arrangement — unless it could get a parliamentary majority for leaving without a transitional arrangement, which it wasn't going to be able to do.

The fundamental condition that Jeremy Corbyn had laid down for a general election, namely the fact that having an election wouldn't precipitate us into leaving without a transitional arrangement during the election, was therefore met. Therefore, it was clearly a possibility that (Jeremy) Corbyn would follow the logic of that and agree to an election.

For their own reasons, the leaderships of the SNP and the Liberal Democrats both thought, in the one case accurately, in the other case very inaccurately, that they stood to gain from having an election at that point. Even if Corbyn hadn't capitulated, the government might very well have been able to get an election simply by having the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and certain Labour members voting with it. We were very conscious, I was certainly very conscious, that we were in an extremely fragile situation where there could well be an election.

In the couple of days before the amendment was actually debated, I'd had conversations with Boris and others in Number 10 at their request about it. It became clear to me in the course of those conversations that he genuinely believed that the way in which he was going to get Parliament rapidly to vote in favour of his transitional arrangement was by threatening the abyss, so to speak. If they didn't vote for his arrangement, then we'd leave without any arrangement. Therefore, they had to vote for it, and vote for it very quickly.

He and the Chief Whip clearly believed that speed and the threat were what was necessary to achieve the momentum to get that vote through both houses and set the country on a path to exit and transition.

It was equally clear to me that he didn't mind terribly which way things went once the Benn Act had been disappplied by the House voting for Boris's 'meaningful motion' without my amendment.

Either his tactic would work and there would be approval of his Withdrawal Agreement and transitional arrangement. Then we would move smoothly into transition and he would have achieved Brexit, after which he could either remain in office or hold an election against the background of having achieved Brexit. Or Parliament wouldn't, despite the threat, vote for the Withdrawal Agreement and then we would actually leave without a transitional arrangement because the Benn Act wouldn't be operative. Then he would have left. Either way he would have left; either way he would have been a hero and therefore all was well.

It was clear to me therefore that the problem about the amendment from his point of view was precisely that the amendment was trying to do what it was trying to do, namely, to keep the Benn Act operative. Accordingly, it became clear to me gradually that no efforts on my part to suggest ways in which we could structure the thing so the amendment did not in any way diminish the force of whatever the meaningful motion was meant to be were going to succeed — because he wanted the Benn Act not to be operative. That was where he was.

He was also clearly contemplating, yet again, trying to get a general election against the background of having left one way or the other. And it was clear to me that if we succeeded in getting the amendment passed, thereby making the Benn Act operative and removing the force of Corbyn's condition, there was a severe risk that we would create exactly the circumstances under which Corbyn would agree, as he did in the outcome, to a general election.

UKICE: The Withdrawal Agreement bill that was introduced in January was quite significantly different in some ways from the Withdrawal Agreement bill the Prime Minister presented at the end of October.

In terms of no parliamentary role on extension, approval of the final deal, some of the protections that Labour cared about environmental and social standards, all of those had been ditched by the time we got to January. Was there a concern in your group that letting the Prime Minister have his election opened the way potentially for a Johnsonian Brexit or a Cummings Brexit rather than your vision of a more consensual Brexit?

OL: Yes. There were many people in the Labour Party, and indeed people in the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, who didn't want to have a general election precisely or in great part on those grounds. I thought they were absolutely right. I thought that the likely outcome of a general election was that Corbyn would be massacred. I couldn't see how that was going to lead to anything other than a very hard line from a new Conservative administration on Brexit.

For other reasons I think it was productive for the UK that Corbyn should be massacred. I thought he was outstandingly wrong, his leadership of the Labour Party was heading in an outstandingly wrong direction. I think it's a huge advantage to the country to have a Labour Party run by Keir Starmer rather than by Jeremy Corbyn.

From that point of view, I thought an election would be just fine. But from the point of view of Brexit, I thought it would not be fine at all. However, the fact I agreed about that with many people inside the Labour Party was not enough, because they were not the right people in the Labour Party.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Do you think the whole process has fundamentally changed the Conservative Party?

Oliver Letwin (OL): I think just at the moment the Conservative Party is in a very odd state. But it's very dangerous to assume that what a great political party looks like on Wednesday is what it will look like on Thursday. Who knows what the future holds? There are plenty of people in the current administration who I think share the broadly liberal views that I treasure. They may well have their day again.

The issue which caused such difficulty, namely Brexit, will after all be out of the way at some point, probably reasonably soon. By the time people are reading this transcript we'll probably be at an end of that issue in one sense at least. We'll be out and whatever terms we're then out, finally, even if there are lots of loose ends to tie up. Other things will come to dominate, and parties respond to circumstance — not least, the circumstances of a pandemic.

UKICE: What about its attitude to the constitution? You described that as experimentalism, some people describe it as vandalism. Do you think that's a profound change?

OL: It's either a profound change or it's a superficial aberration. I prefer to think that it's a superficial aberration. I hope we will return to a position in which you can absolutely rely on a Conservative, and indeed while we're at it on a Labour administration, to maintain a respect for international law and for the fundamental positions of our constitution.

Indeed, I hope also we'll return to a position in which governments have a very considerable respect for trying to convey accurate information. All of these things are very important. I think it is very unwise to assume that everything has now changed forever. Forever is a rather silly word or phrase in any circumstance. Particularly in this circumstance. Political parties can change very quickly.

UKICE: Did the whole process from the referendum, reform, maybe the coalition, did any of this make you reflect about Parliament, about the way in which we run our Parliament, our political system? Did it give you any thought in retrospect, experience of working cross-party much more or anything?

OL: Yes, definitely. First of all, the whole experience from 2010 onwards has persuaded me that the relationships between Parliament and the executive are in need of considerable attention. It's not something urgent, and acting in haste won't help us; but, over the long-haul, I don't think it's satisfactory that we're in a muddle about what the powers of the executive really are or are not.

Secondly, we need change in the Conservative Party. This is in some ways even more important — because I think political parties are much more important than constitutional theory usually describes them as being. It's

amazing to me there are people giving lectures to students about constitutional theory as if parties didn't exist.

This is true in many countries, incidentally; it's not in any way unique to the UK. You can read whole libraries full of books about the structure of politics as if there were no political parties. It doesn't make any sense to consider China without realising that it's the leading role of the communist party that runs it. Equally, you can't consider Britain without realising that the Conservative and Labour parties, and to some considerable degree other parties as well, are what make politics what it is. I'm absolutely persuaded that the relationships between political parties and the mode in which political parties interact with one another is fundamental to the good operation of a country. If they get into a situation where they fundamentally can't act together, even when it's manifestly in the national interests that they should do so, the future is not bright.

Of course, there is real merit in competitive democracy. There's real merit in the dialectic. There's real merit in debate, in bringing out the arguments on either side and in letting people gradually understand the pros and cons. Indeed, in letting the participants gradually discover where their arguments are weak and strong. These things are really valuable. They're built into our legal system. They're built into our parliamentary system, and long may they remain.

But if that productive dialectic just turns into catcalling and a refusal to accept that the other side is motivated by anything other than low motives, the system will not work properly. It has to be a discussion between grown ups who accept that people can honestly and rationally hold differing views. There will be things you agree about and things you don't agree about. Sometimes it's worth exposing the differences and arguing them out, and sometimes it's worth trying to work out how you can work together. For some reason, that's not how our politics has gone recently.

We face many problems as a country at the moment, but I think that's the biggest underlying problem we're likely to face over the next 20 or 30 years. If that lack of mutual respect in politics goes on being the case, we won't be able to tackle the very serious problems we all face, because we're going to just be having a continuous argy-bargy between people who are not recognising the

force of each other's arguments.