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5 March 2021

This interview may contain some language that readers may find offensive.

New Labour and the European Union

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Going back to New Labour, when did immigration first start to impinge in your mind as a potential problem when it came to public opinion?

Alastair Campbell (AC): I think it has always been an issue. At the first election in 1997, we actually did do stuff on immigration. But I can remember Margaret McDonagh, who was a pretty big fish in the Labour Party then, raising it often. She is one of those people who does not just do politics in theory, in an office, but who lives policy. She is out on the ground every weekend, she is knocking on doors, she is talking to people.

I remember her taking me aside once and saying, 'Listen, this immigration thing is getting bigger and bigger. It is a real problem'. That would have been somewhere between election one (1997) and election two (2001), I would say. Politics and government are often about very difficult competing pressures. So, on the one hand, we were trying to show business that we were serious about business and that we could be trusted on the economy.

One of the messages that business was giving us the whole time was that

there were labour shortages, skill shortages, and we were going to need more immigrants to come in and do the job. Particularly those jobs that British people did not want to do, or that they were not necessarily skilled in doing. So, that was one pressure.

I know you have got the Labour Party at the moment doing this whole thing with the flag, because the Tories are wrapping themselves in it. It was not as unsubtle as that, but part of our messaging was that we understand that absolute, patriotic love of country. For some people, that is just a fact of life, down the centuries, through civilisation. That is often for a lot of people dressed up in – however you might want to phrase it – a sense of tribalism. Feeling British means something. So, that was another pressure.

Then another factor in the mix was that our whole message was, ‘New Labour, New Britain’, and modernisation was operating at every level, including the cultural one. We actually wanted the country to look and feel different and more modern. So, I would say these things were all swirling around in a mix. Most of the time, that felt really good. It felt like we had the balance right, but perhaps the whole sense of positivity blinded us to some of these deeper trends of opinion.

UKICE: Did you not have any second-thoughts about the decision to open up to the A8 in 2004?

AC: Going back to what I said about the pressures, the other perspective that I forgot to mention was our absolute determination that one of our big, strategic messages was that Britain is going to be a leading player in the European Union. Britain’s role in Europe was an important part of what we were trying to do.

I think at the time, those other pressures, including the economic pressure, the sense of the country doing well, moving in the right direction – obviously, there was discussion and there was debate but we felt we were in the right place. I can remember a particular briefing I did around that time, where all the right-wing papers, *The Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph*, were really going on at me about the numbers. Because they were running all these stories saying, ‘Hundreds and millions of foreigners are going to be able to come here.’ They would work out the top end of the numbers and say, ‘This is what is going to

happen.'

I can remember saying to them, 'Look, you are doing this for your own political reasons and we are confident that the modelling we have done, and the predictions we have got, show that this is not necessarily going to happen.' So, I think if anybody said to you that they had second thoughts, I suspect they are applying quite a lot of hindsight.

UKICE: Do you think that when it was in power, New Labour missed opportunities to address the European issue? I remember Tony Blair kept talking about a roadshow to sell the idea of Europe to the British people and convince them. It never quite happened. Do you think New Labour could and should have done more?

AC: Looking back, you would have to say yes. When we first got elected in 1997, do you remember that early summit in Holland? The Dutch presidency had this idea of all the leaders and foreign ministers riding bikes as a photo call. All very Dutch. That was very fortuitous, in that we did not know that was going to happen, but it was very deliberate. I can remember saying, 'Tony, listen, grab the first bike, get on it and lead them across the bridge'. I can remember the Italian Foreign Minister fell off his bike. Helmut Kohl looked at this whole thing with utter disgust and disdain that he was expected to get on a bike. Jacques Chirac likewise.

Tony (Blair) just comes across the bridge and waves. Tony was incredibly popular, not just in the UK, at that time. I think some of the other leaders were quite taken aback by how the Dutch people were out there doing the whole, 'Tony, Tony' thing. Maybe we underplayed how we should have been cementing that image in the public mind, here at home.

There is a line in my diaries about when Keith Vaz was appointed Europe Minister. I said, 'Your job is just to get around the country and tell people why the European Union is good for us'. Should we have done more? Could we have done more? Possibly.

I can remember another thing. Peter Hyman [special adviser] used to go on about how, when you were in Europe, you saw all these signs outside schools, outside hospitals and on motorways, saying 'Funded by the European Union.'

Occasionally, we said, 'We need to do more of this kind of thing'. But there is so much to do in government, the pressing things take over, you leave that kind of thing to someone else, it doesn't get done. I think we maybe took for granted the idea that Britain as a member of the EU was a given, forever. If you had said to me – frankly, if you had said to David Cameron as well – at any point up until 2016, 'We are going to come out of the European Union', I would have said that was not going to happen, and I suspect even those who fought for it, like Johnson and Gove, would have said the same.

The EU referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Were you surprised by the rise of UKIP and the pressure that was then putting onto the Conservative Party?

Alastair Campbell (AC): I was surprised by the extent to which they became spooked by it. If you go back, you'd had Jimmy Goldsmith before. Okay, they had money, but they were seen as frankly a little bit eccentric, including by most of the people in the Conservative Party. I think (Nigel) Farage took it to a different place. Yes, of course, it was populist. But people should not underestimate Farage's communication and political skills.

David Cameron obviously had certain, very clear, political skills. But I always felt he was intellectually a bit lazy and that he confused strategy and tactics. I think that Brexit is totally and directly the consequence of that confusion.

He would not have articulated his approach to Europe in the same way as Tony Blair, because Tony was out and loud saying 'Europe is where our future is'. But, in terms of where Cameron wanted to go, I think it was not that different. He was more sceptical than Tony or Gordon, but in so far as he had Europe on his strategic map, it was with Britain there as a strong player in the European Union, fighting our agenda. Yes, not always on the same pitch as the rest. But Britain has to be one of the really big powers. That, I think, is where Cameron was.

I think Cameron does a fair bit of post facto rationalisation when it comes to Brexit. He says it was not possible to carry on without a referendum. I don't agree. He says he always understood it was loseable. I don't think he did.

I have discussed those things with him since. He denies my charge against him, which is that he did not have to do it and that he did it for tactical internal reasons to deal with what ultimately was a strategic external problem: Britain's place in Europe. He never really had a strategy for that.

By 2010, we are out of power. He is in power as the Prime Minister, but the public basically said in that 2010 election, 'We want change from Labour, but we are not really sure about you, Davey boy. We are not really sure about where you are coming from, or where you want to take us. We are going to throw that Nick Clegg guy in there and he will keep an eye on you for us.' That led to the coalition. I was really surprised about how quickly a public not used to coalition seemed to accept the existence of the coalition, and give it a fair wind.

I thought they would not. I thought it would become a lot more difficult than it was for the Tories. Then I think what happened was that Nick Clegg, particularly in the early days, enjoyed it all a bit too much and allowed himself to be used by the Conservatives. Then to be abused by the Conservatives. By the end of it, they just wanted rid of him so they could then have their own agenda by 2015. Cameron had become PM without to my mind a strategy as clear as the modernisation theme of the Blair government. The election gave him a clear strategic purpose, accidentally – 'make the coalition work, but in a way that persuades the public we can be trusted to govern alone by 2015.'

I am not convinced that Cameron thought he was going to get the majority that he got, and I think he was maybe hoping that he could deal with the Eurosceptics inside his Party and the rise of the UKIP fringe outside the party by promising the referendum. He thought, 'That will keep Labour quiet as well and then I can fight on the things that I want to fight on'.

Then his basic electoral strategy was centred on the economy. 'Do not give the keys back to the people who crashed the car', and on leadership, 'You do not want a strong Nicola Sturgeon with a weak Ed Miliband in her pocket'. That was where he was happy in his campaigning and Europe barely figured. We all have to accept some responsibility for that.

Then he wins the majority and he has to have the wretched referendum. I wonder if he felt that perhaps there would have been another coalition, and the

price he would happily have paid to the Lib Dems was to say there would be no referendum. Now he has to have it. I know we all like things that confirm what we think and that is the world we live in, but I think the reason I found Philip Hammond's take on this so interesting when he spoke to you is that, it seemed to me that he confirmed the central view I have always had that this whole debate about Britain in Europe is actually a debate about the Conservative Party, its various factions and its various contradictory ambitions, and it has never really been a debate about the future of the country, the real needs of the country. That remains as true today as it was in 2010, 2015, 2016, or when May was PM, or Johnson now.

For example, what Hammond said about Theresa May in that meeting he had, with Fiona Hill. 'What does Brexit mean? Well, Brexit means Brexit'. That was it. Nothing beyond a slogan. Likewise, he says the day after the referendum, there was no plan. The only sense you have that any real thought had gone on in government about what you might have to do in the event of Leave winning was actually in Scotland.

I have had this out with Cameron. On one occasion, I ended up feeling a bit sorry for him, because he was trapped next to me in a pew at a charity event at a church and there were all these carols going on, and as he was trying to sing, I was saying 'Why did you do the fucking referendum then?'. He said 'It was absolutely impossible not to, because the country had to settle this question'.

But if you go back and look at the state of public opinion at that time – the public, not the media, not the right-wing newspapers, not *The Sun*, *The Mail*, *The Telegraph*, *The Express* banging their ridiculous drum – the public were not clamouring for this.

UKICE: You had a role advising the Britain Stronger In Europe campaign. What was your role?

AC: To be absolutely honest, I feel a little bit guilty about this, because I did not do that much. I think, like a lot of people, I felt it was not going to be lost. So, I went into their campaign HQ a few times, but I was not involved day to day. I thought Alan Johnson, who I really like and who I really get on with, suffered the whole time with what (Jeremy) Corbyn and acolytes were up to. Alan was

leading the Labour side of the campaign, but without really having the backing of the actual Labour leadership.

I remember having conversations with (George) Osborne and at one point with (David) Cameron, and I was really quite shocked by how they kept saying, 'All we have got to really do is get Corbyn out now. We are winning on the economics. Now we have just got to get Corbyn out to mobilise the Labour vote'. I thought that overestimated two things. I thought it overestimated how much Corbyn could necessarily move people in the direction that they wanted, and it also totally overestimated how much he would do that.

They kept saying things like 'Well, we have got Labour in the grid. That is going to be Labour's day', but they never knew what was going to happen. Because they did not have that buy-in. Meanwhile Alan would be trying to get Corbyn to do something that might actually cut through.

I do not know if I would have done it differently. In (Philip) Hammond's interview, where he said Ken Clarke wanted to do the positive campaign – I definitely think they needed more of that. Much, much, more of that.

Normally you take your campaigning to where it is going to affect people's living standards. But I always felt with Cameron and Osborne, when they were out talking about this great economy that we are going to put at risk if we leave, because of what was happening elsewhere with austerity, you had millions of people saying, 'Well, I cannot see this great economy. I do not know where it is. I am not involved in it. It worsened the sense of an elite banging on about a different world.'

I think that then played into the other side being able to present themselves as being for the poorer people, for the people who were struggling, for the people who wanted to take back control of their lives. And because the Cameron-Osborne message was essentially a 'you'll be worse off' message, it allowed the other side to get up the message about 'Project Fear.' The SNP had done something similar in the 2014 referendum in Scotland, and because Cameron and Osborne were on the winning side in that one, I think they underestimated how much damage the Project Fear attacks did to them.

Osborne was my main point of contact, in a way. But it was not regular. To be

absolutely honest, it was just me firing off the odd note or email when I was getting exasperated. But even when I was getting exasperated, until quite close to the day itself, I did not think they were going to lose.

UKICE: Did you think they should have been more prepared to indulge in what people might call 'blue on blue'?

AC: Yes. That was the other thing that I raised with them the whole time. They knew what Boris Johnson was. They know who he is, what he is and what a fucking liar he is, that he will do and say anything in pursuit of his own interests. They were enabling and empowering him. Again, because they thought they could not lose, they would just say 'Well, Boris is Boris. Once it is all over, we are all going to have to get back together again. Therefore, we cannot be out there doing this blue on blue stuff'. And Labour weren't really taking down the Leave arguments either, because Corbyn was not emotionally engaged in rebutting the arguments, he was if anything leaning into them, added to which Labour were thinking 'why should we do the Tories' dirty work for them? It didn't do us any good in Scotland.'

Because you did not have Labour organising campaigning from the top and because Corbyn was so indifferent to the whole thing, that also sent a message to a lot of the trade unions, who I think could have done a lot more. They could have been much more active in terms of getting direct messaging to their members, and spelling out the true cost of what was going to happen.

What happened in the end is that the campaign became one of Project Fear against Project Lies, and because Project Lies felt no compunction at all about taking lumps off the other side in every which way – and once they understood that Cameron was not going to attack them back, that empowered them more to think, 'we can actually say what the hell we want'. They took full advantage of that. It was pre-Trump Trumpism.

UKICE: When you knew the result of the referendum, what was your immediate reaction – in terms of why you thought it had been lost, and what you thought might happen next?

AC: By the day itself, I was not surprised. That is not hindsight, because I felt a few weeks out that it was slipping away. Craig Oliver had asked me to go and

help with the debate preparation with Amber Rudd, Sadiq Khan, Ruth Davidson, all the ones who were doing the big TV debates. I went in and I did several days on that.

Before the debate at Wembley, which I think was Sadiq, Ruth Davidson and Frances O'Grady, we had them all in at one of those buildings near Parliament. We had been going at it all day. They were all okay. They were all fine and that is where Amber Rudd was doing her, 'I wouldn't let him drive me home' line about Johnson and Sadiq was Sadiq, excellent, and Ruth Davidson was Ruth Davidson, very strong. It was all fine, so far as it went.

I remember at the end of the debate preparation, Lucy Thomas, who was a full-timer on the campaign, said to me, 'How do you think it is all going?' I said, "Well, do you want my honest opinion? I think it has been lost'. She almost went white. I am always very wary in those situations, when you are trying to pump people up to go and perform, you do not want to be saying, 'This is shit and we are losing the argument'. So I had not been saying that to the politicians, not in so many words. Instead I had been trying to get them to address what I saw as the weak points in our arguments, and the strong points in our opponents' arguments.

The confidence of a politician is a very precious thing, but after they had all left I said to Lucy what I really thought. She looked really, really shocked.

Not long before, I had been up in Burnley. I have got a few rituals when I go up to Burnley. One of them is that before I go to the football, I wander around the place and just talk to a few people and get the feel for things.

What I noticed was that lots of people who I already had a sense would be voting Leave, were. But lots of people who I absolutely would have assumed were not going to, were also voting Leave. I can remember one in particular. A woman who had always been very supportive of me, always been very supportive of Tony and she said, 'No, I am voting Leave'. I said, 'You're kidding me'. She said 'Definitely'. When I asked her why, she said, 'Turkey'. I said, 'What about Turkey?'. She said, 'Turkey, they are going to join and they are all going to come over here and live here'.

I thought, 'Bloody hell'. I had not really been onto this whole Facebook thing,

but then she showed me the stuff that she had been getting, and I thought, 'Bloody hell, this is a problem'.

I walked on down through the town. I met about three people who likewise I would have had down as Remainers who were not, and a couple of them said, 'Unelected bureaucrats in Brussels telling us what to do'. Of course, I did my usual thing about arguing, 'Well, the head of the Cabinet Office is unelected. The head of the military is unelected. You have lots of unelected people. Power is with the elected'.

I tried to explain the pooling of sovereignty, but it was gone. No chance. I said all this to Lucy (Thomas) and she said, 'No, I think we will be all right in the end, because there are still a lot undecided, and the economic arguments are getting through'. I said, 'Well, I am not meeting many of them, and the message I got from a lot of people was that this great economy might feel great to Cameron and Osborne, but it does not feel great to us'.

Then on the day itself, I did not go to bed and I will tell you exactly where I was when the outcome became clear. I was in the ITV studio in Gray's Inn Road and I was sitting alongside Liam Fox.

We got to that exact moment when, I think it was Tom Bradby, said, 'Well, we have now reached the point where Remain cannot win'. I looked at Liam Fox and he looked at me. There was no celebration. He looked sick. I remember I felt sick. I thought, 'This is just a fucking disaster'. I remember we did our bit, went outside to the atrium where people were milling about and David Davis was there.

Davis goes up to Fox and he says, 'We did it'. I remember (Liam) Fox said, 'Yes, and what do we do now?' and I said, 'Yes, exactly. What do you do now? You haven't got a fucking clue what you are going to do now'. It was kind of weird. They were not pumping the air. There was none of that. Remember Johnson and Gove's faces the next day – they did not have a clue what to do with what they had achieved.

I cannot remember when it was, but a few days later I did a debate with (Nigel) Farage, where we almost came to blows. But, maybe I was in a more fortunate position than some of the elected politicians who had fought for Remain and

now felt they had to simply abide by it, go along with the ‘will of the people’ message being pumped out, which very quickly became the new big lie, that whatever the costs, the chaos or the consequences, Brexit had to happen, even if nobody knew what it meant in practice. But we quickly knew it would bear little relation to the lies that had been told for it. I was clear from the word go, that if you really cared about Britain, and Britain’s future in the world, you had to try to change this. I never made any bones about that.

The People's Vote campaign

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Open Britain replaced Britain Stronger in Europe in the summer after the referendum. Were you, at that point, convinced that you wanted to play a role in it?

Alastair Campbell (AC): Again, maybe I could and should have done more. I did not want to organise anything, but I followed very closely what was being organised. Once we got to that point where you had quite an interesting coalition of people coming together and coalescing around this concept of the ‘People’s Vote’, that felt to me like the point at which reversing this thing was possible. It was going to be possible to win the argument that, far from being a denial of democracy, it was an expression of democracy to put the final outcome on what Brexit actually turned out to mean, to a final say referendum.

It was, politically, incredibly difficult, not least because of all that ‘will of the people’ in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. But one thing I really disagree with Philip Hammond about was his view that it was undemocratic for the Government to negotiate a deal and for that deal then to be put to the people in a referendum. I saw that as profoundly democratic as opposed to undemocratic, and whilst I knew that was an incredibly difficult argument to win, I thought it was winnable.

There was a period where I was probably working on that more than any of the various things that I do. Once the People’s Vote campaign was up and running, I got very involved, on a day-to-day basis.

I felt it was winnable. The one thing that I knew, though, was that it was only winnable if you could win it in Parliament. At the start, you could fit the MPs really up for it in the back of a cab, the numbers were not that great, but they

were not impossible, we knew there were MPs who would shift because ultimately they believed our position more than the one the various frontbenches were pursuing. But it was only winnable in Parliament if you won in public opinion, and the MPs felt the pressure from that. That is why those big public demonstrations became very important.

UKICE: The People's Vote organisation was an umbrella structure with a number of different groups inside it. There has been a lot written over the last couple of years about dysfunctionalities in the structures. Can you talk us through what those structures were, what you thought about them and whether they worked effectively?

AC: Well, ultimately they certainly did not work effectively, because we lost. As I said, I think it was winnable, but Open Britain went and then the new thing came in. Roland Rudd chaired it. I think I underestimated the extent to which he would become a massive problem, latterly.

Then it just emerged with different politicians. Anna Soubry was there, Caroline Lucas, Dominic Grieve, David Lammy, Alison McGovern, Stephen Gethins. Different people from different parties, bringing different skills. There was at least a good energy to it.

At the start, it felt to me almost like a bit of a talking shop, a bit of an intelligence-gathering thing, and then eventually, the People's Vote campaign was set up. And that was an umbrella of all sorts of different organisations, with all sorts of different agendas. But it did actually become, I think, a very, very effective campaign.

To this day, I do not understand why Roland Rudd did what he did, but he basically dropped a hand-grenade into the whole thing, and got rid of James McGrory and Tom Baldwin, who are both flawed, but we like flawed people. Campaigns need people who do not just fit a very ordinary mould. They were both incredibly energetic, incredibly hard-working and they were doing good stuff. There were some really good people in there, at all levels. From a standing start, we got ourselves big time on the map, and we did some pretty amazing events.

Those marches, as David Lammy said when I interviewed him for *The New*

European, were 'a bit Waitrose'. But they were moving MPs.

Just to give you an example of how big that shift was, Keir Starmer is my MP. Around the time I changed my name on Twitter to 'Alastair People's Vote Campbell', I had a meeting with Keir in my kitchen downstairs, and I remember Keir saying, 'You are completely wasting your time. It is impossible. Politically, this is impossible'. He was not going to get involved.

Well, not that long later, I remember standing on the side of the stage, organising the speakers, and we had on the platform at the same time not just David Lammy, who was with us from early on, but John McDonnell, Diane Abbott, Keir Starmer, Emily Thornberry. They moved.

Likewise, Philip Hammond, who was clear he saw it as undemocratic to some extent, nonetheless said that if he had felt that the People's Vote was the only way to stop no deal, he would've backed it. You had Tories who were moving in that direction.

You cannot prove the counterfactual, and it is kind of irrelevant now because of what has happened since the election. But I do think if the Lib Dems and the SNP had held out a few more weeks, a few more months even, and had just let (Boris) Johnson hang in the wind with the numbers that he had in that Parliament before he won his election and got a majority – I think we could have got there. The one thing we know about Johnson is he will do anything to be in power. If we had moved a few more Tories, if we had hardened the Labour position... who knows?

Like I say, you cannot prove any of this. We lost, they won, Johnson is Prime Minister, and though the Brexit he has delivered bears very little relation to the Brexit promised, and though it is a complete fucking mess, you now have Tories and Labour locked into a position which depends on them essentially ignoring realities and living in a land of myths.

It was a combination of (Roland) Rudd destroying the People's Vote campaign, and the Lib Dems and the SNP going for the election for their own reasons, and giving Johnson what he wanted, that led to me realising it was all over.

I had always felt that since Jeremy Corbyn became leader, the country was not going to give him the majority. I just always felt that. So when it came to the election I thought, 'The only way now this is going to happen is if you have a Labour-led coalition that goes through with a second referendum after an election'. Now, I thought it was a very long-shot, because in our system, even with the experience of 2010, trying to get the country to vote for lack of clarity, rather than clarity, is far from straight-forward, but long shot or not, it was worth trying. It didn't work though.

UKICE: So the route, in your analysis, to a People's Vote was basically a prolonged period of political instability, and a political stalemate in Parliament?

AC: Yes, partly, but using that time to build the democratic case for a final say vote on the final outcome.

UKICE: That could have led to a growing disenchantment of voters who think their verdict has been rejected by the people they sent to Westminster, and it basically depends on accepting no compromise. So, not voting for Theresa May's deal, and not attempting to get a Stephen Kinnock-style softer Brexit. Did you ever have reservations about playing that very high stakes game in pursuit of a People's Vote?

AC: I guess that the only time when you had to think about that was around the time of Theresa May doing her deal. Because by then, she was clearly in very vulnerable position politically. But I do not believe that was ever going to be accepted by the Tory right.

I think Johnson was going to carry on as he was, undermining, destabilising, looking for the main chance. I think David Davis, (Iain) Duncan Smith and that lot were going to keep going. I guess what you are asking is whether, by us being so hard line in saying 'This has got to go back to the people and the People's Vote', that meant that a less damaging Brexit was thrown away. But I just felt that, whatever the outcome of these negotiations, it was the right and democratic thing for the people to have the final say on the detail.

A so-called soft Brexit was at that time the least popular option in the country and would, I think, have collapsed into either hard Brexit or no Brexit. We were offering people a way out by settling this with a new referendum. I still think

that was right and democratic.

What blew that was the fact that Boris Johnson got the election that he wanted, battered Jeremy Corbyn and we are where we are and it is a disaster.

Speaking purely for myself now, not the whole of the campaign, I always was very hard line on it. I accept that. I was one of the few that did not hide it ... this is about trying to stop Brexit.

I said, 'I believe that the best thing to do for the country is to recognise this is a disaster, to accept that the people voted for Brexit, but to recognise that they voted it on the basis of promises that were false and lies that were made. Let the Government go and get a deal. They have got a mandate to do that. Once that deal is clear, the people are entitled to say, 'Yes, that is what they want'. They are also entitled to say 'No, that is not what I want.' I thought that was worth playing hardball for, and that we could have won.

UKICE: How easy was it to set up a national campaign from scratch? Were there any frustrations, and were any lessons learnt from the referendum campaign?

AC: It is hard. That is the first thing. You need money. You need people. But I do think that of all the campaigns I have worked with, and I have worked with a lot of campaigns, this was one of the best, in terms of the progress we made. But ultimately we lost, so we failed.

It was not exactly a standing start of course. You knew the sorts of people who would be prepared to give money for a campaign like that. You knew the sorts of people who would work for it for crap money and long hours.

I think the messaging around the People's Vote campaign was far better than the messaging around the Stronger In campaign. I think when you talk about the lessons we should have learned, it did stay very middle-class in terms of its base. I think it did feel that, a lot of the time, even though we had this massive and growing database of people around the country, it still felt quite Westminster-focused.

But that was inevitable, because Westminster was where we were trying to make the actual change, in trying to change the minds of MPs. There were

some real problems in there, but if I look back at it, the problems came down largely to personality.

I think that getting as many people as we did onto effectively the same message, that the people should have the final say, was an achievement. At the start of it, as I say, you could have got the MPs who were willing to back that idea in the back of a cab. By the end of it, we were not that far off from delivering.

I will always judge a campaign by whether it wins or it fails, and we failed, we lost. But that was a huge shift. Getting as many people as we did onto the streets was hard, but we did it. I will go to my grave not understanding why it collapsed in the way it did and what the various motivations were of those who were responsible. I just do not understand it. I get why our opponents railed so hard against the idea we were being undemocratic. I simply do not get why the people on our own side did the damage they did.

Parliamentary deadlock and party politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): How difficult was it to get the Labour Party officially on board, as opposed to just having some enthusiastic backbench cheerleaders?

Alastair Campbell (AC): It was very difficult. The way that Tories try to portray Keir now as this fanatical Remainer is ironic, as it was hard work to persuade him of the legitimacy, to persuade him of the possibility. You had a lot of people in the country saying, 'Our will must be respected'. But I would say that their voice felt louder than it actually was, because of the way that our media was- 'Will of the people, will of the people, will of the people'.

I had a running argument with Piers Morgan, for example, who kept saying, 'I have not met anybody who has changed their mind'. I was meeting people all the time who had changed their mind, and I kept sending their details to Piers and saying, 'Here is another one who is willing to come on your programme'. They did not want them on the programme.

So, you had this drive saying, 'We have got to be respected'. Then, over here, you have people saying, 'This is a disaster. We have got to do

something about it'. It became a race. I felt at various points we were losing and at various points we were winning. When you have got that feeling, I think you have got to keep going.

UKICE: Would it have been different if Labour had supported the campaign a lot earlier after the 2017 election?

AC: I don't know, is the short answer to your question. It might have done. I think if I look back on it, our fundamental problem was that we never really overcame that basic democratic question. 'We've had the referendum. Therefore, it has got to happen'.

But, because it took us so long to get to that point where the Labour Party and some Tories were on side, by that time it just entered the body politic that it was somehow undemocratic to have this referendum on the outcome of the negotiations. Internally, we felt we were winning that argument. Externally, there was always an opposition to it.

UKICE: As Theresa May faced those months of gridlock, did you ever think there was any prospect of getting her or her Cabinet to see tacking on a confirmatory referendum to her deal as a way of breaking that deadlock?

AC: Even her best friends will say Theresa May is something of a closed book, and I am not sure any of us really knew, though between us we had access to most of the people in and around her.

I remember there was one point where the table just was not big enough for all the people who were coming and wanting to take part in the strategic discussions. But I do not think we ever had anybody at that table who really understood what Theresa May was trying to achieve, or what was going on inside her mind. As is clear from some of the ministers of the time, I am not sure they really knew either. John Mann had a curious relationship with her, seemed to have more access than a lot of Tories, and though he was on the Brexit side of the argument, he did fill me in at times on her thinking. I also got the sense from him and from others – I have no idea if this was true or not – that Philip May might have been more sympathetic to the idea.

We were working all the angles. The one time I was face to face with her, in a

TV studio, I got no sense of her thinking the second referendum was a runner, but I certainly got the feeling during the whole Kyle/Wilson period that there was at least an interest in there about a People's Vote. So, I think because we did not really have a clear sense of what her long-term game-plan was, we did think that it was possible. Very difficult but possible. The difficulties, as ever, were caused by the shenanigans and divisions inside the Conservative Party, and also by her feeling that as a Remainer who became PM on the back of Brexit, she had to lean even further towards the Brextremists. The irony was she was never really viewed as a Remainer at all, because she had been so lukewarm in the referendum campaign.

UKICE: What about the shenanigans inside the Labour Party, with the creation of the Independent Group? Did you think that was your moment, with a group that was united around wanting a second referendum? Or did you see that as a bit of a distraction?

AC: I am trying to separate what I think now from what I thought then. I can remember on the day, I was actually in France and I was watching it on Sky News in a hotel. I can remember not feeling the sense of excitement that was obviously being felt there. I cannot exactly explain why. I can see why they did it. Whether it is the SDP experience, I don't know, but I did not feel it was going to work.

UKICE: Did they talk to you beforehand? Did they get tactical advice from you, as somebody that they might assume would be quite sympathetic?

AC: I talked to most of them at various points during the build-up. But was I involved in advising on the launch and all that? No. They kept it pretty quiet, I think.

UKICE: Did you have an idea that it could be a defection of 60 plus? There were people in the Labour leadership that were worried about a more significant split in the Labour Party, as there were people such as Tom Watson involved at one point. Did you ever think that was possible?

AC: Put it this way – the fact that you kept hearing that, after a while, makes you think it is not going to happen, rather than that it is. It felt to me like one of those things that, once it first was launched, you really needed the follow-

through. It did not feel to me like it was there. So, I felt we were back to just focusing on the two big parties.

I am not saying these guys were not significant in terms of the debate. They were, and there were some effective communicators and campaigners among them. But as a force that was going to break open the Labour Party or break open the Tory Party, I did not see it.

UKICE: During this period, there were some Liberal Democrat 'People's Vote' amendments, which the official People's Vote campaign seemed to think were jumping the gun.

AC: The tactical considerations were a very strange thing. Because once we had got the campaign, we still were having lots of different meetings with different groupings. We were meeting Labour MPs, we were meeting Lib Dems, we were meeting the SNP, we were meeting Tories, and sometimes we were meeting them together.

It was not easy to get all of the tactical considerations right. It was not easy to get them to agree. Do not forget, particularly with the Liberals and Labour, in some places it is a close relationship and in some places it is very, very fraught. They wanted to isolate the Labour Party and use the strength of Remain to change politics. Sometimes it looked like that was more important to them than winning the campaign. If People's Vote had backed them before Labour was ready to come over, it would have played directly into the idea we were hell-bent on damaging Labour and damaged the campaign. I think we maintained a pretty impressive focus on our core objectives

UKICE: Did you have any big hopes when it finally came to Parliament expressing a view on the way forward in the indicative votes? Did you think that was winnable?

AC: Totally. That is the period at which I felt the numbers were moving and that they were moveable further. I was pretty confident that they were losing. I did not know where the numbers would go, but the thing felt like it was moving in our direction. I felt that all the way, to be honest, until the end, when the campaign collapsed, and the election was called. It felt like we really had a bit of momentum, that a shift had taken place in public opinion, and that was in

turn shifting the mood and the votes in Parliament.

UKICE: Was there a conversation about the decision to vote down all soft Brexit options in those indicative votes? Did you at any point think, 'This is high-risk'?

AC: Yes, of course we did. But what the hard-liners on the other side were doing was high risk too, and they were not going to fade away from the hard Brexit options. I can remember the very last rally in Parliament Square, whatever date that was, and Dominic (Grieve), Hilary Benn and Ian Blackford, who had just come over from Parliament, were all saying to me, 'It is not going to happen'. I remember Ian saying the rally was a swansong.

I think that, up until that point, most of us felt that it was difficult but doable. That, if we had gone for that compromised position, it would have helped the other side to get to a harder position. As it happens, they have ended up with the hardest position of all. Could we have stopped that? I don't know.

UKICE: You could say that the next opportunity to pursue this came in the talks between the Labour frontbench and the Government, when Theresa May opened those talks up. It seems that one of the things that those talks failed on was whether the option of a referendum appeared on the face of the Withdrawal Agreement Bill. Did you have a role in the background about the line Labour was taking?

AC: Only in terms of continuing those discussions with some of the participants, including Keir Starmer and John McDonnell. I was getting feedback from the Government's side as well at one point. The feedback from them was that they did not think Labour was serious. I do not know why they were telling me that. I won't tell you who it was, but you would be quite surprised, I think.

I think they basically felt that Corbyn was allowing this process without it wanting to go anywhere. They felt that John McDonnell was sitting there working out, 'How can I use this to do these fuckers a lot of damage?'. They thought that Keir was really not wanting to push it as far in practice as they thought he wanted to push it in theory. And of course Corbyn was outside the room, but his views very much hovering in the room. So, the whole thing felt

like shadow boxing, both between government and Labour, and within the Labour team. Everything we got back from both sides was ‘another meeting where nothing much happened.’

UKICE: You were speaking to John McDonnell a lot during that time. Did you gain respect for him as a political strategist? How do you think he handled Brexit?

AC: He was the most powerful figure within the Labour Party who, it seemed to me, was trying to get to the right place. I kept hearing from others that Corbyn and McDonnell were not getting on, that there was a lot of bad blood between the teams and all that. I never heard that from him, I never got that sense from him. But what I did get was the sense that Corbyn and Seumas Milne in particular, on this issue, were just blocking him in any way they could.

He got a lot of flak from the Corbynistas when he did that GQ interview with me, because he was sitting down with someone they see as an enemy, but I felt he had genuinely reached the view that Brexit was going to be dreadful for the kind of people he cares about, and that the People’s Vote was a legitimate route out. But I don’t think Corbyn ever got there.

I do feel that with all of them they were so cowed in the early stages by this whole will of the people thing, and so shell-shocked by what had happened, that we took too long to get to where eventually they got to.

UKICE: Did you think it was helpful to have Tony Blair playing such a big role? Were you advising Tony that he should get stuck in, or were you saying, ‘You are not very helpful here’?

AC: Both, actually, depending on when and what. I think there were times when Tony’s interventions were really, really powerful and really, really helpful. We did not overdo it. But you know what the media are like. Sometimes you need somebody who they would say is an A-list big-hitter before you will even begin to get your point out.

I felt this during the referendum as well. Tony and John Major going to Northern Ireland was on the news a bit, but both sides dismissed it as a couple of has-beens revisiting their greatest hits. You look at where we are now, and

the risks in Northern Ireland as a result of this border in the Irish Sea, tensions coming back, huge hit on exports from GB to NI, huge rise in direct exports from Ireland to the rest of the EU, cutting out the GB route, the country should have listened.

Some of Tony's interventions – because he is good at details, because he is still a very good communicator – were very, very useful. But, yes, there was a lot of push-back. There were some people within the People's Vote campaign who absolutely think Tony Blair is the best politician of our lifetime and there were others who absolutely despise him, and felt he damaged the cause. I would say he helped the cause, both in terms of his public interventions, and the strategic discussions behind the scenes. But he is as aware as anyone else that there is a balance to be struck.

I got a lot of push-back from certain quarters, in terms of people felt I was too high-profile in the campaign. That was what is inevitable when you have a coalition. But I got on well with the Lib Dems, I got on well with the SNP, I got on well with Dominic (Grieve), Anna Soubry and those guys.

If you remember what we did, we got Tony and John Major to do recorded stuff to play at rallies, rather than have them there in person. We were worried there might be a few boos, but actually, it went down really well. Would we have put Tony up at one of those big rallies? We probably could have had him at that rally, but the truth is, if you put Tony Blair on the stage, there are all sorts of other issues with security et cetera. It just changes the mood.

I think we got the balance about right. But it was a discussion we had every time he was involved.

UKICE: The other big political development of the summer were the European Parliament Elections. As a big reader of political mood, did you think from the Brexit Party vote that you were pretty done for, or did you see it as a big opportunity?

AC: I saw it as an opportunity. The Brexit Party got a pretty good share of the vote, but the numbers did not fall in such a catastrophic way for the anti-Brexit voice that you thought, 'This is game over'. I did not think that at all. Added to which, I thought that the dynamics in the Conservative Party, even before

Johnson became leader and certainly before Johnson became elected with his own mandate, still said, 'All to play for'. So, yes, they were not great. But equally, it was not game over.

The end of the People's Vote campaign

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Moving onto the autumn then, the tensions and disagreements within the People's Vote campaign spilled out into the public domain. What happened from your point of view?

Alastair Campbell (AC): It is baffling. It all sounds so petty and ridiculous now, when you think of the scale of what we are talking about, and how high the stakes were, not just for the campaign, I couldn't give a damn about that, but for the country. But essentially, some of the people that Roland Rudd really liked did not like some of the people who were running the campaign day to day. It strikes me as no more complicated than that. Some of the people in the campaign could not bear working with some of these other people, and it just got ridiculous, pathetic.

In so far as there was an actual strategic point of difference, it was an argument about the extent to which we spoke to and for our base, passionate core supporters, and how much we spoke to those beyond the base, the soft Leave voter, or even the Tory Remainer. Tom Baldwin, James McGrory and I were very much in the latter camp. You need the base to get out marching, write to MPs, donate and so forth. But if you rely on them entirely, particularly if you are the challenger in the campaign, you do not grow as you need to, and there is a risk you alienate the people you need to reach. The nature of modern campaigning now is highly polarising. In the 90s, the nature of most broadcast media and the need for funding usually forced parties closer to a liberal pro-business centre-ground. But like the Brexit Party, and then Johnson's Tories, we had a passionate base and I felt the little gang that Rudd was close to were constantly wanting to preach to the converted, so we could all tell each other how right we were.

But it all played into the idea of a metropolitan elite telling Brexiteers they were thick, a caricature which helped our opponents. There was a Remainiac gravitational pull, which I felt we had to resist, because it risked taking us further away from the people we needed if we were to win. 'We're now joined

by Roland Rudd live from Davos' was one of the low points, after he got himself onto the Today programme. Self awareness was not his strong point. And though Hugo Dixon was certainly not stupid, an even more traditional Etonian than his 'best pal at school' – Johnson – was not exactly the way to win over the new voices we needed.

In the end, Roland (Rudd) decided to get rid of Tom (Baldwin) and James (McGrory), and he had devoted a lot of time and energy in getting a mainly pretty supine board who went along with him. I am not saying Tom and James are perfect, none of us are, but they had both done an incredible job. They are both incredibly hard-working. Roland wanted the whole time to have Hugo Dixon, in particular, and some of his friends, at the top strategic table, even while knowing they were simultaneously off planning another campaign.

They were coming to very small strategy meetings, hoovering up everything that was being discussed, revealed, told, and meanwhile they were off setting up a rival campaign. To this day, I cannot get it. I cannot get why they would think that was either professional and effective in campaign terms, or justifiable. Roland was always very taken with the idea of a political realignment, perhaps because that is something he had wanted since his SDP days. Whatever the merits of that, it was not the purpose of the People's Vote campaign and the team there were right to resist any such mission creep. In the end, it felt like Rudd had given up on a referendum and was pushing hard for the Lib Dems to do as well as they could in a General Election. That may well be why he got rid of the campaign leadership at that moment, I don't know. But it was a catastrophic act of vanity.

UKICE: Do you think that, with the gift of hindsight, you had put too much emphasis on the danger of no deal, which meant that you were left slightly blindsided when Boris Johnson came back with a deal? Did that take some of the momentum from you?

AC: When Johnson got the majority that he got, I felt there was never going to be a referendum. Impossible. Also, he did have the mandate. I do not think he has a mandate to lie. I do not think he has a mandate to say that there is not a border in the Irish Sea when there is. I do not think he has the mandate to pretend that all the problems at ports, or the massive decline in exports for some sectors, or the huge additional red tape, are all the fault of the EU.

But he did win, and the campaign message was Get Brexit Done. So, I think by then, for all the shouting and the bawling, I think once the election was called, I was worried that it was all over.

UKICE: Did you make any effort to try and coordinate some sort of Remain alliance before the 2019 election?

AC: Once we had got into that election period, first of all, you had a lot of our best campaigners being defenestrated. Dominic Grieve, Anna Soubry and so on. You had lots of our people very angry with the Lib Dems and the SNP for jumping into the election trap. You had all the parties recognising they then had to go off in their own directions and fight a campaign, and for different reasons, apart from Johnson, most did not want the focus to be Brexit.

So, really, all that was left was people outside the party structure, which I guess I was by then, having been kicked out of the Labour Party for voting Lib Dem as a protest in the European elections, off doing our own thing, and trying to win an argument about tactical voting. The only way we could get a People's Vote was to get a coalition within Parliament of the parties that backed it, Labour, Libs, SNP, Greens. But I cannot pretend I was ever confident that the whole tactical voting thing was going to work. There was a lot of effort put into it. Within our system, the two main parties are very, very strong.

UKICE: In that autumn, did you have conversations with the SNP and the Lib Dems about the potential for them not to support a general election?

AC: Yes, a lot. But it all came along quite quickly. I was mainly talking to Ian Blackford, and I cannot exactly remember when it was, but I remember something definitely shifted in him. He decided that the election was a greater priority. You can sort of see why from the SNP's bigger picture. I could not for the life of me see why the Lib Dems went for it.

UKICE: Did you have conversations with Jo Swinson and the Lib Dems? There are some stories that they had read the European election result as indicating they would do quite well in an election

AC: Yes. I think Chuka (Umunna) became quite influential with the Lib Dems. I

think they got an overinflated sense of how popular they were and how popular Jo Swinson was. We had belated efforts to try to stop them voting for an election. They had set their course and it was going to happen.

UKICE: As a veteran of these things, were you impressed by the Conservative election campaign?

AC: No. They won and they won well, with a reasonable majority. But for me, a campaign has got to be related to what it is that you are hoping and wanting to do for the country. Therefore, I would like to think that after the campaigns that we fought and won, we did then go on and do our level best to deliver what it was we were elected on. Their campaign was just another set of slogans, a few more big lies.

For example, Johnson with his oven-ready deal ... here is the deal, put on a white coat, put it in the oven, pull it out, simple. It was yet another wave of lies in a story that has been one whole catalogue of them from the start. So, I was actually quite sickened by it. I was sickened by the way the media just let them do it as well, which has set them up for the way the media let the Government get away with murder now, whether on Covid or on Brexit. The normalisation of lies and gaslighting, and government not being properly to held to account for it by Parliament and media is another sad consequence of that campaign and those who led it.

Reflections on British politics

UKICE: Is that a permanent change in the way politics is in the UK now?

AC: Well, I have got a horrible feeling. You have got 120,000 people dead and you have got the worst economic hit of Covid, you have a level of political corruption I never thought we would see in UK government contracting, you have got Brexit not working as it was promised, you have got the Northern Ireland issue, you have got thousands of lorries crossing the Channel empty. They announced £78 million for mental health today when they have spent £37 billion on Track and Trace which hasn't worked and they are still ahead in the polls.

Something has gone very wrong in our politics and Boris Johnson and Brexit

are two very large symbols of it. Let me tell you, if it is a permanent change, we are fucked as a country, and we might well be fucked as a democracy too. That is my view. Something very strange has happened to our media. I did a fair bit of foreign media when I had a new volume of diaries out recently, and a lot of their questions were about what on earth has happened to the once feared British media, why were they so soft on Johnson over Covid, why are scandals not seen as scandals, why is nobody covering what is actually happening with regard to the consequences of Brexit? It is a very good question. Johnson once said that he switched from journalism to politics 'because nobody ever built a statue to a journalist.' Like so much he says, that is not true. There is a statue to George Orwell outside the BBC New Broadcasting House, and both journalists and politicians would do well to reflect on what he wrote, what he warned, and what we mean by 'Orwellian.'

UKICE: Looking back, ultimately why did the pro-Remain movement fail, do you think?

AC: I used to argue with Tony Blair that 'As well as saying, 'There is a good side to globalisation', you have got to recognise the downsides and you have got to speak about them, and have policies that address the issues that flow from that'. He would argue we did that. I wonder if we did enough

I do think that even if we underestimated to some extent the impact of globalisation, even if we underestimated the political implications of immigration, we should not have lost. We should not have lost the big strategic argument that allowed the referendum to be called in the first place. David Cameron should not, in my view, have allowed himself to be played tactically on the question of the referendum.

Once the referendum started, they should not have assumed that just banging an economic drum and getting the great and the good to speak as they did would work, would persuade people whose lives were shit, who did not feel the economy was working for them and who were persuadable by a charlatan and a populist like Johnson or (Nigel) Farage that it was all down to these nasty Europeans.

UKICE: One of the things we have seen, as a result of the People's Vote campaign, you could argue, is a popular mobilisation of a support for Europe

which was notably quite absent over the bulk of the 40 years of UK membership.

Do you think that Labour did the right thing in accepting Boris Johnson's Trade and Cooperation Agreement with relatively little criticism of its content, and do you think that Labour should be positioning itself to argue for a much closer relationship with the EU at the next election?

AC: No. I thought it was a terrible mistake to back the Brexit deal. Although we talk about people saying what they think and thinking what they say, and the need for authenticity in politics, it was not true that no deal was the only option. Because with the numbers Johnson had, that deal was going to get through.

I know people do not like abstention. They had already abstained on Covid. But I think Labour could easily have said, 'It is going through. You have got a mandate for this deal. We have accepted Brexit. We think you have done a terrible deal and we think we have got to keep a very careful eye across it. We will do that. We will scrutinise it. We will expose its failings. We will challenge it where we can'.

I think one of the reasons Labour is in the position it is at the moment is because of that decision. Does that mean that Labour has to be in the position at the next election of saying, 'Let's re-join the European Union'? I think that is quite a big leap. But to avoid the consequences of Brexit in the political debate, because you're worried the Tories will say you just want to undo it, is crazy. It is fundamental to our future, economic, political, diplomatic. You cannot just sit it out.

By the way, Labour does not have to have a position on that at this stage. Labour should have a position at this stage that every single day is tracking what is happening on Brexit and calling it out.

Interestingly, I noticed that Keir Starmer did mention Brexit very briefly in his response to (Rishi) Sunak's Budget. What a ridiculous country we have become, though, that in the middle of this you have a budget where Brexit is not even mentioned by the Chancellor. Absolutely incredible. It is the most gigantic elephant in the tiniest room there has ever been and it is utterly irresponsible.

I am doing a German TV interview later today and they sent me the areas they want to cover. One was 'How can Michael Gove not want to talk to the lorry drivers who are sitting there, wondering how they hell they get their goods through borders?'. We are in this fantasy world where Brexit, having been fought on lies and won on lies, now takes us to a situation where the Government is taking out propaganda-torials in British national newspapers, to say how well it is going.

This is madness. Labour should be calling that out day after day. What is going to happen now, as it all goes wrong, is the Tories are going say, 'Hold on a minute. You voted for this deal. This is your deal as well'. So, I thought it was a bad mistake.

UKICE: One of the things that the Remain movement did create was a mass movement with a lot of energy behind it. Does that just dissipate now, or does that get moved in another direction?

AC: I think it is very hard to work that out at the moment because of lockdown. Would people be protesting about the Government's ineptitude on Covid-19 if we did not have lockdown? I don't know.

A lot of energy was there, a lot of people were there, but then a lot of it has just scattered to the wind. I will be honest, I get stuff every single day on email and social media, people giving me ideas and wanting to do stuff to fight back on Brexit. Part of me just thinks, 'I cannot do it again'.

I think a lot of people feel like that. But eventually, the energy and the anger have to go somewhere. The other thing to say is normally, in some way, it goes into Parliament. It does not feel like that is happening at the moment. So, it has to go somewhere. Where, at the moment, I do not know. It is not healthy.

UKICE: Looking forward, the immediate event on the horizon now may now be another referendum in Scotland, after the Holyrood elections. Based on your experience of campaigning for Remain in the referendum, and a bit of experience of the Stronger Together campaign during the 2014 referendum as well, is the independence referendum winnable another time around for the pro-union cause?

AC: It is very hard to read. I think it has made independence more likely. I also think what is happening currently in Northern Ireland has made a united Ireland more likely. But I think the road to both is incredibly complicated. I do not think any of us can confidently foresee how that is going to play out.

I actually think that if you look at what is happening in Scotland at the moment, and again with the incredible double-standards of our media it is hard sometimes to get a clear picture, but what is happening is serious and it is real. I think that Johnson, and the sort of person he is, does strike me as quite a recruiting sergeant for the cause of others. I feel that Brexit was to some extent, not entirely, a product of English nationalism. Another massive mistake that Cameron made was that, the day after the last Scottish referendum, he said 'Right, you've had your fun. Now we are doing English votes for English laws'.

Whereas what he should have done, I think, was go to Scotland and say, 'That was too close for comfort. I want to find out what this is all about. I want to engage in this argument and do it properly'. Instead of which, he did the English nationalist thing.

Instinctively I am against nationalism, whatever it is, but I wonder if the SNP should be called the Scottish Independence Party, or I don't know, the Scottish European Party, instead of the SNP, because what they want is to be independent of the UK inside the European Union. That is quite an appealing strategic pitch for a lot of people. Nationalism is invariably inward looking. Brexit is inward-looking. Breaking from the UK to join the EU has a different, more outward-looking dynamic, but that is not how the SNP have built their case in recent decades.

With Scotland and Ireland, I think it is impossible to say at this stage, there is a long way to go. I don't know, constitutionally, what you do if you have a Prime Minister with quite a good majority in Westminster, who is saying, 'I do not care how big the SNP majority in Scotland is. We are the only people who can grant the referendum and it is not going to happen'. I do not know what happens in those circumstances.

But if Scottish independence did happen, I can see the Welsh thinking, 'Why do we want to just hang around as a sort of fag end on England?'. It is the four

hanging together which means something. If the special status for Northern Ireland, and this wretched border in the Irish Sea, does lead to the renewal of tensions, and violence, or the trend of Ireland direct exports to the rest of the EU sees a real change in the nature of the economy north and south, massively to the Republic's advantage, then alongside the demographic and generational changes, that could lead to political change too. So, it is a mess. It is a mess. Of course I could be wrong, nobody has a monopoly on wisdom, but I feel more strongly now than I did even in June 2016, that Brexit is one of those rare moments in history when a country chooses to opt for its own decline. It makes me sad, and angry in equal measure.

What makes me angriest is that Johnson didn't even believe in what he was fighting for, other than as a vehicle for his own advancement, and that the people who will be hardest hit are the ones in poorer areas that these liars and charlatans used to help them get it over the line. And the cavalier approach to Northern Ireland is unforgiveable. It is not just that they are reckless in their approach, I sense they are largely indifferent. Whether the UK breaks or not, I don't know. But the Conservative and Unionist Party deserves to break. This whole wretched story is a story about that Party. That they are playing fast and loose with the Union though is clearer now than ever it was. Tony Blair and John Major were right in what they said, and it is sickening to see what was perhaps the greatest achievement for both of them – peace in Northern Ireland – is just one more pawn in Johnson's political game-playing.