

John McDonnell

Member of Parliament for Hayes and Harlington May 1997-

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The EU referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): As someone who had been thought of as a Eurosceptic, when did you take the firm decision that you would be supporting Remain in the referendum campaign?

John McDonnell (JM): I can't be particularly precise.

I was relatively agnostic. In the past, I voted in the original referendum not to go into the European Union, or the Common Market as it then was, but since then I have always treated it with almost a matter of relative indifference. It has never been a huge political issue for me.

After Jeremy (Corbyn) got elected leader, we had a meeting with Hilary Benn and Angela Eagle, and they were very keen on leading the referendum campaign, or at least being leading lights in the referendum campaign when it came up.

So when we met with them – I remember the meeting now because Hilary got quite agitated – I wasn't really keen on whether we took a particularly firm stance or whatever, but they were very keen to lead the campaign.

I questioned. I said, 'Do we really want to get into a situation where we are

plumping so heavily on one side that might well divide the party?’ They said, ‘Yes’. I said, ‘Okay, fair enough’. I wasn’t really exercised by it.

They were very keen to take a leading role, so we literally said to them, ‘By all means, do so’. They wanted to bring in Alan Johnson, we said, ‘fine’, and said, ‘Whatever resources you need, let us know and we will make sure you are properly resourced, but tell us’. I think we got to a compromise in the end, which was just tell us what you need and what you want us to do and we will get on with it.

But from my perspective I wasn’t really exercised by the whole thing. I was much more about, ‘I just want to get on with the development of our own manifesto and our policy programme as rapidly as possible’.

You have got to remember that we were having to withstand monthly coups against Jeremy’s leadership. There was an attempted coup on Jeremy’s leadership within six weeks of him being elected leader, by Lisa Nandy and others, so I was too busy dealing with survival to really focus too much on Brexit. I was more about, ‘If you want to lead on this, you can have the resources you want, tell us what role you want us to play, and happy if you want to bring in Alan Johnson to be the focal point of it. By all means’.

But it wasn’t such a big issue to have a row over.

UKICE: So was your assumption that this would just be an annoying spat within the Conservative Party, they would do some renegotiation, come back, win it, and then you could just move on and the whole thing would be forgotten?

JM: Exactly. My own view then, it shows you how we underestimated the whole thing, was that this was just party management by (David) Cameron to shut up his Eurosceptics, win the referendum, move on, settle it for another number of years and just get on with the real world.

I treated it very much like that. I was too busy ensuring that our administration survived, but also mobilising to try and get some form of political programme in place, so that people could see where we were mounting an effective opposition to the Tories and putting in an alternative programme, so that

people could mobilise our growing membership.

I just thought of it as an irksome task that we had to get through. If Hilary Benn and Angela (Eagle) wanted to get on with it, at least that was another issue we didn't have to fall out about because at one point we weren't sure whether we could even construct a Shadow Cabinet.

Remember, Jeremy had just been elected leader, and during his leadership speech we had people resigning. I will always remember the BBC coverage had almost like a ticker-tape line whilst he was speaking of people resigning from the frontbench of the Labour Party.

So we had enough on our plate, really, and if this was a way in which the centre-right of the party in particular wanted to take a leading role but still stay on board with us, it was worth giving them whatever they wanted to keep them happy. Sounds terribly cynical, but it is the reality of just survival at the time.

UKICE: What do you make of the criticisms we have subsequently heard of the role that Jeremy Corbyn played in the referendum?

JM: Well, I looked at that, and I thought, 'What more?' Because others wanted to really be the focal point and lead the campaign, so our job was to say, 'Tell us what you want us to do and we will do it, tell us what money you want and you can have whatever you want'. At that point in time, we were building up our coffers because of the increase in membership. So we had the resources. Also, we were quite willing to talk to the unions about any additional money.

So, because they were so keen to lead on this, I thought our job was just to make sure they were properly resourced and almost, 'Tell us where you need us to go'. Poor old Jeremy was set up on all of this, I am afraid. All this bit that he didn't do enough. I saw his diary and he responded to every campaign request. I did much less than him because I was too busy on developing the economic platform, but I did quite a number of speeches.

One of my jobs, and I got it in the neck for this as well, was that somehow we had to keep some of the elements on the left on board. Some were Lexiteers, but some were veering that way if we weren't careful, because of the situation

in Greece.

So I did a number of meetings round the country with Yanis Varoufakis. We toured round the country from a left perspective, saying, 'Don't use the Greek issue', the way the EU had treated the Greek administration, 'as an excuse for pulling out of Europe'. Because the last thing we want is this disaggregation of the left within Europe itself.

So I don't accept the criticism. Again, you have to look back on some of this with a bit of humour. We knew that a coup was coming against Jeremy at some stage. Rosie Winterton, the Chief Whip, informed us and said, 'The coup is coming. It is planned for post-local government elections if they're disastrous, or if the referendum goes wrong that will be used as an excuse for the coup and resignations'.

That is exactly what happened. I have looked at it and I have tried to be as objective as possible, but this idea that Jeremy didn't do the groundwork or the legwork in campaigning, I don't accept that at all.

The criticism they made of him was on that television programme, when they were pressing him about his attitude to the EU, he said seven out of ten. Well, I actually think seven out of ten is a score that the majority of Labour Party members would most probably give it as well.

So it was seen as a sort of bridge-building compromise but he got panned for it, poor bloke.

UKICE: When did you think, 'This is all going to go horribly wrong here'?

JM: I got worried about the campaign overall. Again, you mustn't be personal in all of this, but it didn't have any sort of pizzazz, really. It didn't really take off in that sense. Also, maybe I had a bit of a biased view because of the nature of the public meetings that I was doing, but I was doing places up north in particular. Apart from Liverpool and the city centre areas, I was doing some of the smaller town meetings, and I was getting quite heavy feedback as well.

There were differences in different areas in the attitude towards being on the same platform as the Tories. I think I did one debating event with a Tory on the

same platform who was a Remainer as well, but I don't think I did more than that. In most areas which were strong Labour, if you were on a platform with a Tory, you came across as the establishment. That was what was so galling, really, the ability of Boris Johnson and others to try and portray us as the establishment. I thought that was a bit risible.

I felt the campaign wasn't very dynamic in that sense, it wasn't clear enough, and that combination of trying to do an all-party thing in some areas, in London maybe, came across as 'This is just the establishment talking down to us again'.

UKICE: In terms of how the Remain campaign was organised, how did you feel it worked as an operation?

JM: It was dreadful. It was poorly organised, lacking in strategic focus, the messaging was pretty poor, and it was not listening to anyone. That was part of it, and these things happen in campaigns. I have just lost a general election, in 2019, and the lesson of all of that is you need a very strong narrative all the way through and, at the same time, you need to ensure that you are strategically placing resources effectively. I don't think the campaign had that, really. Just didn't. They were better campaigning after the referendum than before it.

The path to the 2017 general election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): On the day after the referendum did you think that British politics now had a new fluidity, and that a general election was potentially going to happen more quickly than before? Or, were you too preoccupied by the rolling resignations of the Shadow Cabinet?

John McDonnell (JM): Yes. I knew a coup was coming against us, our own Chief Whip had told us that. I was trying to focus completely on the nature of that coup and how it would happen. I thought it might be rolling resignations, so I was focused solely on survival.

We were phoning Hilary Benn at midnight on the Saturday or whatever it was, seeing whether he was launching a coup or not and whether he has resigned, or if anybody has resigned. Then, every two hours, another couple of them had

resigned, even though some of them we had already spoken to and they swore fealty, within two hours, they were resigning.

So I was slightly distracted from Brexit by political survival, basically.

UKICE: When the leadership challenge happened, were you concerned that a largely pro EU membership could be a serious threat to Jeremy Corbyn?

JM: No, because I worked on the basis that the attacks on Jeremy, that was a set-up. They set Jeremy up and used it as an excuse for the coup. I don't think that really had the penetration amongst the membership. They used as an excuse, this argument that Jeremy didn't campaign hard enough, wasn't committed enough, that sort of thing.

In all the work I had been doing round the country, on the ground, amongst members, that wasn't the feeling. The whole point of it is a lesson for the current situation. Timings of coups are quite important, and if you go too soon you have blown it. That is what they did.

UKICE: What was the rationale for appointing Keir Starmer, who had resigned from the Shadow Cabinet as Shadow Brexit Secretary?

JM: One, we were desperate to appoint anyone. Literally, over the weekend, by the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party on the Monday, we had to have some form of Shadow Cabinet in place. Otherwise, we really would have been under threat. So, we had to get as many people in position as possible, and so anyone who was willing to serve, we appointed effectively.

Obviously, with Keir (Starmer), what we needed was someone competent. Actually, we did need a person with an eye for detail, and that is exactly what Keir very successfully brought all the way through.

UKICE: Thinking back to that autumn and Theresa May's Conference speeches in 2016, were you surprised by the approach she took to Brexit in that?

JM: You will forgive me if I am not an astute follower of her speeches. What we found about Theresa May was – and, again, I am trying not to personalise this

– is that there was such a lack of political judgement throughout. I know she was on such a difficult wicket in terms of her own party, I accept that and I will give her that. But I found she just lacked political judgement about what was feasible, and so ricocheted from one issue to another.

All the way through, when we went into negotiations and there was Keir, myself, Becky (Rebecca Long-Bailey), and Sue Hayman, who was actually excellent on all the detail on the agricultural and environmental negotiations, our problem was that we were never sure whom we were really negotiating with and whether anything agreed would actually stick with them.

When we were meeting them team-to-team, they would fall out amongst themselves in front of us, contradicting one another, and it was just impossible.

I can remember when Theresa May was close to going. Philip (Hammond) and I had a reasonable working relationship, and, to give him his due, he got his civil servants together and they gave us quite good, detailed briefings on Treasury matters and financial matters, particularly in relation to the finance sector and its future. We had discussions about equivalence and super-equivalence. It was all very interesting and entertaining.

But on one occasion he brought me in and said, ‘Look, if we don’t get this deal done’, and he gave me a date, ‘Theresa May won’t be there’. Basically, I was honest with him, that wasn’t really much of an incentive to seal the deal because it was quite clear to us that she wasn’t going to be able to deliver from her own side whatever we agreed.

So we were left in this ridiculous position where we were negotiating something that, even if we could get agreement on, they couldn’t necessarily deliver. We had marched all our troops up to the top of the hill and there had been wreckage, being able to do that. There were people splitting off and threatening all sorts, and yet we would have forced them up to the top of the hill, and then you look over it and the Tories have dispersed or split amongst themselves, unable to deliver anything. It would have been an impossible situation.

That was part of the problem with Theresa May’s position, in that she, to a certain extent, she bore the imprint of the last group that sat upon her. As a

result of that, you couldn't really have much confidence in whatever she came up with, or delivering it for that matter.

UKICE: Rewinding back to 2017 and the general election campaign, many people, the Prime Minister herself included, thought it would be a Brexit election. Why do you think Brexit didn't come to dominate that campaign in the way that some thought it would?

JM: Austerity was still biting so hard, and we had a very simple message. We were the anti-austerity party. It is the reverse of what happened in 2019. Up until 2017, we had a clear narrative, effectively communicated, despite the mainstream media doing their usual to any form of a left administration.

We were effective in having a simple anti-austerity message and then a policy programme where each policy reinforced that message. Whether people believed in them or not, at least it was a coherent, anti-austerity programme, and we were much more effective in terms of, not the mainstream media, but in terms of the build-up of social media and mass campaigning. We reinvented word of mouth as a form of political communication, with all the rallies. We were much more creative and invested in the social media side of that.

So we stole a march on the Tories by having that simple narrative with a policy programme reinforcing it, which was well communicated.

The difference between 2017 and 2019 is that we never had a clear narrative. We weren't very good at the communicating. We had slipped back again, even on the investment in social media, and so that allowed the Brexit issue to dominate, as against the anti-austerity campaign that we had up to 2017.

Plus, we were at the early stages of the discussions around the implementation of Brexit, so people were still willing to give you a bit of time to resolve that in 2017, whereas by 2019 the 'Get Brexit done' slogan chimed, because by that time people were absolutely exhausted with Brexit and just wanted to get it off the agenda no matter what the outcome.

Brexit, June 2017 – December 2019

UK in a Changing Europe: Did you expect Theresa May to reach out to you

at all after that 2017 election result?

John McDonnell (JM): We might have been able to conjure something up around a customs union deal. But all the time, I could never work out the scale and balance of forces within the Tory Party of how much they could deliver at different stages on different issues. Neither could she, for that matter.

I tried to use Philip as a much more astute calculator of the resources within their party, but by that time as well, he was in locked horns with quite a large number within his own party, too. So it was extraordinary, not knowing the balance of forces within their own party.

You have got to remember as well that at one point in time, although we survived and got through the first coup, we were still, on our own side, at risk of a significant split of some sort as well. Chuka Umunna et al. were gathering forces. At that time, I thought, and I think a lot of commentators thought, that they had much bigger numbers than they eventually had. In fact, they most probably did.

My big fear was a split of 60 or 70 Labour MPs away from us, and then us almost becoming no longer the major Opposition party because other coalitions would form. So most of my efforts were to try and either avoid a major split on our side, or minimise it. Hence, my move towards a second referendum vote more vociferously, because I had to keep on board the People's Vote campaigners. I wasn't being too cynical about it. This was about the survival of a socialist administration and the Labour Party and trying to get into government with a socialist administration.

So anything I could do to prevent a major split, that is what I was doing, basically, even to the point of having regular conversations with Alastair Campbell. Hush my mouth! Lightning will strike. I even did an interview for him for his magazine and I am still getting slagged off on social media for that, but there you are. Things had to be done to keep everything together.

You may not think it was realistic at times, but at one point there were real fears of quite a major split in the Party. I didn't want to give them any excuse around the EU to enable that to happen, particularly around the People's Vote stuff.

UKICE: In the summer of 2017, was an opportunity missed to definitively rule out a second referendum?

JM: To make that call then was almost impossible, I think. Again, once you have been bloodied in a coup, you are very wary about making sure you are not going to do anything that gives anyone any excuse for a second coup. There was conspiracy after conspiracy. That was part of my problem. Half my life was spent on just survival, and keeping the show on the road, as well as trying to develop the overall economic policy and other elements of our policy programme.

It was too difficult to make a call on something like that to enable us to steady the ship. It would have been too risky.

My view was to try and keep the show on the road long enough that we could get the Brexit legislation through in some form. When we got to September of 2019, at that point in time I remember we were meeting with the other opposition parties. There was all this discussion about whether we could form an administration with Jeremy in Number 10, solely on the issue of Brexit, to get that thing done.

At that point in time, my advice to Jeremy in September 2019 was announce a date for a general election next spring, and it would set a timetable for the Brexit legislation to be dealt with. If we included in that the proposition of a People's Vote, that will satisfy most of our side as well. Even if that went down in Parliament, at least we tried. But set a date for the election, to give everyone the security that we would deal with the Brexit issue and then move onto the election and not, in any way, try and stay in an administration longer than that. Because that is the way in which we could get a discrete coalition of interest to get this thing over and done with.

Jeremy and others weren't keen on that, so it never held sway. I was talking to Ian Blackford almost on a daily basis then, because the key issue was that if we kept the SNP on board, we would be able to continue on in that informal alliance around the Brexit issues and avoid a general election. But, as soon as the SNP decided they wanted the general election, we were stuffed, basically.

I think the main motivation on the SNP was that they were worried about what

was going to come out of the (Alex) Salmond legal action that was coming up in January. So I think they just wanted to clear the decks as rapidly as possible.

With the Lib Dems, (Jo) Swinson wouldn't tolerate or just would not have Jeremy anywhere near Number 10. She wouldn't support that, and I think that was Chuka (Umunna) in the background putting the knife in, but there you are.

The problem is they [the Liberal Democrats] believed their own polling during the summer. That was it. They had obviously done extensive polling about Jo Swinson and about their political standing, and they believed it. I thought, from what I had seen, it was all a bit flaky, as demonstrated in the election.

UKICE: You clearly had a membership that we saw at various party conferences was quite pro-Remain, wanting a People's Vote. Did you get any sense during this period that Labour could be accused of not letting Theresa May 'get Brexit done'? Did you get any sense that you were losing your voters on the ground?

JM: Yes, because my own constituency was a Leave seat, if you remember. My constituency was a Leave-voting seat, so of course we were. You were getting that sense, and the longer it dragged on the worse it got. Our classic dilemma, wasn't it?

The horns of the dilemma we were on, was massive support amongst rank and file Labour Party members, both in terms of Remain but also then in terms of a second referendum, and then, back in our constituencies, that not being reflected amongst our constituents.

There was still a majority in most seats of Labour Party voters in favour of Remain during the referendum, and then support for some form of People's Vote, that was coming across. But that still meant that in our seats we were losing support and that came across.

That is why I just wanted to get the thing over and done with. That is why I thought, if we could set a timetable with the outcome and give people a commitment, that would simply afford us time to deal with the Brexit legislation, and then we would go to the people. I thought that was the best way of getting

through. The SNP and the others pulling the rug, and then we go into an election, was the worst of all possible situations.

UKICE: What about the idea of the early election, just before the October no deal deadline, where did you stand on that?

JM: I didn't think it was feasible, really, and we certainly weren't ready for one. I wanted us to demonstrate that we were willing to deal with the legislation effectively, get it done, and then, for our own side, willing to go as far as we could on pressing for a People's Vote. Then, if it failed in Parliament, at least we had tried, and we could move on.

I wanted a clear process, to demonstrate to everyone that we had done our best, if you like, and it wasn't down to us if others delayed or deferred it, but that was never going to happen unfortunately.

For people who supported Brexit and the Labour supporters who supported Brexit, we could never better the offer from (Nigel) Farage or (Boris) Johnson in terms of we are getting it done. You couldn't out-Brexit the Brexiteers. Electorally, as far as I can see, the only thing that we could do is try and neutralise that by campaigning on the NHS and other matters, but even when we did that, the campaign on the NHS then came via Brexit as well. That was part of it.

So the other focus then was to try and at least draw back and build the Remain vote as much as we possibly can. It was the horns of a dilemma that was almost impossible for us to get off.

UKICE: At various points you tried formulations like 'we need a jobs-first Brexit', 'the sort of Brexit they are going for is a bankers' Brexit', and that sort of thing.

JM: Yes, it didn't work.

UKICE: And why do you think that that was so unpersuasive with a lot of Labour voters, particularly in manufacturing seats, who might actually have been the most worried about some of the economic fallout?

JM: It had marginal impact. For those people who had voted Brexit, it was quite an emotive issue, and anything other than straight down the line Brexit was seen as a betrayal almost. Talking about a 'jobs-first Brexit' and all this sort of thing, they thought, 'Hedging your bets a bit, aren't you?' It was like that, as simple as that. You could not better the simple messages of, 'We are going to get the job done', 'It is going to be Brexit', and that was it.

Even if you talked through the potential consequences and, therefore, the conditions that had to be attached to any Brexit, people thought, 'You are just trying to con me. You are trying to get off the hook, aren't you? That is what this is all about', and that was it. You just couldn't cut through anything other than that.

The different messaging had no better cut-through on that. So, therefore, what do you do? First of all, you try and at least consolidate your Remain vote, but the more you try to consolidate your Remain vote, the more Brexit voters you alienated as well. It was that sort of issue. Sometimes contingency comes into this historically, doesn't it?

UKICE: And during that period when Theresa May was trying to get her Withdrawal Agreement through, there were stories going around about offers, discussions happening with Labour backbenchers. Were you actually sitting there and thinking, 'If a few of them vote with Theresa May, we can get this through and get rid of it'?

JM: Yes, yes, a sort of Garden of Gethsemane moment, 'For God's sake, take this away'. Those discussions were going on quite a bit, and obviously we were getting odds and ends of feedback on that, but it didn't mobilise the numbers in that sense.

I think maybe it was partly because those individual MPs as well, if they were Labour MPs, a lot of them were coming still from hard Brexit-voting seats, or close seats. So they didn't want to alienate their own electorate, too, by going too far. So there didn't seem to be the quantum that would enable that to happen.

It wasn't that people disliked Theresa May or anything like that. She was perfectly amenable and civil in every discussion she had and her team had.

Gavin Barwell, to give him his due, ran a very effective operation in terms of Chief of Staff, of being in communication with a wide range of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. That was perfectly appropriate; there was no problem on that. He was trying to get messages across.

But the dilemma for a lot of Labour MPs was the same as for us. If you did sign up to something, could she actually deliver it, or was she going to be there to be able to deliver it either? Of course, you had the right wing of the Tory Party within Parliament all over the place. This issue became to them more important than anything else on the agenda, and they were willing, some of them, to commit harakiri to get the thing through. Extraordinary.

UKICE: Can we just go back a little bit to 2018 and the various shifts in the Labour position on Brexit? Starting with February, when Jeremy Corbyn made his speech in Coventry and talked about a customs union. What was the thinking behind the customs union initiative?

JM: If I can recollect, it was one of the key elements that our own backbenchers were putting to us. Economically as well, it was the right thing to do. We just wanted the minimal level of disruption. Particularly if we were going to go into government, we didn't want to be landed up with all sorts of problems facing, particularly, our manufacturing base for the future.

We always thought the finance sector will look after itself. They will manage a deal of some sort and they will get through. The issue for us was we had a big emphasis in our manifesto of building and rebuilding our manufacturing base, making sure that was all part of the 'green industrial revolution', and part of that was about the ability to trade. It was a key element of that.

So, therefore, the customs union idea was in tune with what we were doing in terms of our economic and industrial programme, and our industrial strategy that we had been campaigning on for those years. In addition to that, it had very strong support amongst the PLP, as almost a matter of principle.

UKICE: Then, as we get to the autumn, the composite motion on Brexit from the 2018 Conference – what was the thinking behind that?

JM: For us, our job was to manage the Conference in a way which actually did

allow people to have a thorough and proper debate, and engage with the delegates again. Under New Labour the Conference had been downgraded almost to a spectator sport. So, all our principles were about reclaiming Conference as a member-led operation and a member-led process of engagement.

When it came to this issue, we wanted to ensure that the Conference reflected that, but at the same time you just have to manage to get some element of compromise as well, because you didn't want to have the Party portrayed as so heavily split. So, therefore, it is like any negotiation in any- I was going to say parish councils upwards, but parish councils have now been seen to be somewhat more contentious than even Parliament in recent weeks. But in any of those negotiations, if you are coming out with some form of statement at the end, you will look for forms of words that hold the whole place together as best you can, so elements of ambiguity were there.

So that was the whole exercise then, of trying to get a positioning which would just get us through the next period.

UKICE: And what did you make of Keir Starmer's apparently unscripted aside, that 'We are not ruling out Remain'?

JM: Yes. Well, there was one occasion, I have forgotten even what the formal words were, where I had a news round starting at half past five, and by the time I got to eight o'clock I was told I had got the wrong line. So I had to change the line halfway through interviews.

That is the situation we were in at the time, which was trying to balance a whole range of spinning plates. Occasionally, Keir would spin them in a slightly different direction from others.

People think this has all been plotted. Sometimes, it was just responding to the meeting or the climate of opinion that was in a particular room at a particular time. That was part of it as well. Having coherence around this was very difficult at times. Mind you, that was the case across all political parties.

UKICE: What were your first impressions of the People's Vote campaign when it launched in spring 2018?

JM: Initially, I thought it would be just a fairly narrow campaign with all the usual suspects, but I very rapidly got disabused of that, because it had such a high penetration across so many organisations and individuals in campaigning organisations I knew. Plus, there is no doubt about it, it had overwhelming support in large sections of the Labour Party. Geographically, a bit mixed, but, because I am a London MP, certainly in London there was a high level of support.

So initially I was a bit sceptical. I thought it most probably would be a relatively small campaign, but very strong and very well resourced. We knew there was quite big money behind it. But at the same time very quickly it was clear that it had quite a momentum behind it as well. Pardon the pun.

UKICE: When did you start to become convinced that backing a referendum was possibly the best option for Labour?

JM: I can't remember the exact date, but it was soon after the Labour Party Conference 2018, I think it was. I started meeting Alastair Campbell and others, just to talk through where they were at, where they were going to. I was quite open about it; it was up in my office on the Leaders' floor. They were quite helpful in terms of providing support on different positions, and at the same time, they were extremely helpful in fanning down the flames that Chuka Umunna and others were setting alight in the various bush fires within the PLP and within the Party.

So, I think fairly soon after that. It was then a matter of seeing how we could first of all, allow me to lean towards the People's Vote position much more publicly as we went on, so that we could steady the ship within our own Party and within the PLP.

UKICE: Did you have much interaction with the 'leading lights' of the People's Vote movement?

JM: Roland Rudd. Alastair Campbell, but Roland Rudd, I kept in touch with throughout. I was completely open about all that, and, as I said, I made sure that when some of those meetings took place it was fairly clear what I was doing. I didn't want any allegations of doing anything behind people's backs. I wanted to make sure that they knew we were open to discussion with all

concerned, really.

UKICE: Were you worried that, by making the People's Vote look credible, that prolonged the agony of Brexit? If you look at the indicative votes, it basically meant that nobody moved from their first best option or felt obliged to compromise.

JM: Yes. I took the view they weren't going to go away, so they had to be dealt with. They had such support, as we saw generally in terms of their demonstrations, but, more importantly, they had such support within the Labour Party and in some unions. Some of the smaller unions in particular. They had to be taken seriously, really.

I didn't work on the basis that somehow I was propping them up or promoting them. I was working on the basis that they were a phenomenon that had to be dealt with.

UKICE: Were you of the view that if you did it, then Jeremy Corbyn wasn't obliged to deal with them?

JM: I could do things that Jeremy Corbyn couldn't and, in some ways, because I was seen as a key element in the Labour leadership, I could do things that enabled us to straddle a whole range of different currents within the Party itself.

I didn't go on People's Vote's platforms until near the end. I avoided being too provocative in that sense until quite near the end, when, at that stage, we needed to keep them fairly close to us.

It is interesting, the way that they fell apart, isn't it, in the general election period? It was almost like coming from the left, where we set up an organisation, split and enjoy expelling each other.

UKICE: Presumably, part of meeting with Alastair Campbell and so on was to get reassurance that they weren't using this as a splinter group to prise apart the PLP. What did you think when you saw The Independent Group (TIG) – did you think that this was a small group of MPs acting alone, or did you worry that this was the start of using the People's Vote and the referendum to make that

split real?

JM: The issue for me on the People's Vote was to make sure that we had a relationship with an organisation that actually did reflect the views of a large part of our Labour Party membership and support. That was the first thing.

The second thing, of course, was to try and ensure that they were not used as a resource to support a significant split in the Party. As I say, my job was to ensure the administration survived. If we'd had a split of 60 or 70, which sounds unreal now but at the time certainly wasn't, it could have meant the end of the administration.

So, anything I could do in terms of forming relationships with elements – and it wasn't just the People's Vote – that could ensure that resources in particular were not rendered to Chuka Umunna and others, who eventually formed TIG, was absolutely critical. The resource issue is critical because when you have got a campaign like that, you have built a huge database. That is the key political resource that people have now. That is the first thing.

The second thing is quite significant financial backers as well. So, if I could do anything I possibly could, and I am not being cynical about this, I am just being straightforward because we had to survive, having had one coup against us. Anything I could do to ensure that we denied those sort of resources to a group that was going to split off, and use this issue as the grounds for splitting off, was absolutely key for us.

I think Alastair Campbell and others, within the strategic discussions they were having, which I wasn't party to, I am sure they were making the same calculation. Do they stick with us and try and see if we can get something sorted round the People's Vote, or do they go with the split group? I think they must have taken the calculation that there wasn't sufficient support behind Chuka and others that would render it to have been a situation that could deliver anything.

I can remember sitting on the frontbench with Keir in one debate, and Chuka Umunna made some intervention. I said to Keir, 'Look, there is something he said another time. I will check'. I texted Alastair Campbell, and he sent down a piece of information that then Keir got up and used in the debate. So that

confirmed in my mind that Alastair and others had taken a tactical or strategic, I am not sure which, decision to run their strategy through the Labour Party, rather than this breakaway group.

UKICE: Moving on to when Mrs May came back with her Brexit deal, what was the substantive problem with it for Labour? The Labour position was still to support Brexit.

JM: It was the customs union issue. That was the main one.

I think we went through that argument on the form of words if you like, with not 'the' customs union but 'a' customs union. That became a sticking point amongst quite a number of members of the PLP. Plus, the Northern Ireland issue, as well, was all over the shop, the Good Friday Agreement, but that seemed to be one of the sticking points there.

I think at one point we thought we might be able to get a deal around a form of words on that, and Gavin Barwell was working quite hard on that. The whole issue, really, was a Tory Party that was fragmenting before us into almost civil war position.

UKICE: It always seemed quite interesting that Theresa May couldn't get her deal through because enough of her backbenchers thought we would be trapped in a customs union with the EU forever. Then, she couldn't get Labour to support it because you didn't think it offered enough through the backstop, or a customs union you couldn't leave.

JM: It was an impossible dilemma for her, I can see that. But we didn't really even get into a proper discussion of other forms of words effectively by that time. I think, also, by that time they were beginning to look pretty frayed and exhausted as well.

UKICE: Did you ever think, at that stage, we are really going to go for no deal, or we might actually have no deal by accident? And did you ever think, 'That could actually not be bad for us electorally, even if it would be hugely damaging for the country'?

JM: Yes. No deal by accident was a possibility. That was what was working at

the back of my mind. I didn't see any electoral advantage in that, because I thought the chaos resulting from it, everyone would get the blame for it, really. So, yes, that was a fear. Stumbling along all the time.

UKICE: Was part of your calculation about Theresa May that if her deal really got badly defeated, it might open the way for a general election?

JM: Yes, I thought so. I thought at some stage we would have to say, 'Look, we have got to go back to the people on this. We have got to have a general election on this', and we were always willing to have a general election.

I don't know whether it was appropriate or not, but my argument always was the positioning that we should take is to demonstrate that Theresa May really wasn't leading the country or her Party, that we should take a firm grip of it, set out a timetable.

As I said, from that September on I was saying to Jeremy, 'Look, set the timetable. Say next March, April, you are going to have a general election, this is the timetable for the legislation, this is the timetable for finalising the last bits of the negotiations, and there is a clear timetable that we can adhere to. Then, if anyone does break that timetable, we will go to the country on that basis, that you have done your best and it is these other buggers who are screwing it up'.

I mean, in that way, at least we would have been seen to be masters of our own destiny, but that didn't find favour in Jeremy's office, so that was it. Jeremy was interested in it at one point, maybe looking to see whether or not we could go beyond the April period, but I said no. You couldn't go more than six months because at least that is a reasonable timetable in terms of finalising the last negotiations and the legislative process, really.

UKICE: So was part of your calculation that (Boris) Johnson wouldn't do a deal with the EU to take us out, that he would still be struggling and not be able to conclude anything?

JM: No, I didn't think that. Actually, I thought he would always have difficulty getting a deal. I have dealt with Johnson over the years, remember, because of him being the Mayor of London.

The thing you have to know about Johnson is that there is a difference between the reality and anything he says. I keep saying, he has a passing relationship with the truth. So, he would have signed anything and portrayed it as Brexit, whether it was or not. I thought he would do some form of deal, and then renege on it at a later date, and that is partly what has happened.

So, no, I never underestimated that. Johnson is that sort of person. For Johnson, politics isn't a vocation or anything like that for him. Public school, Oxbridge, House of Commons, Number 10 and then off to sinecures in the City of London. That is the way. It is game-playing for him. That is what this is all about.

UKICE: As you get into the summer of 2019, after the European elections, did you ever consider the idea of a Remain pact, in the way that Johnson collaborated with Farage?

JM: No.

UKICE: Was that on principle or because you thought it wouldn't wash?

JM: It wouldn't benefit us in any way; it wouldn't wash. In the discussions that we had with the other political parties, we were meeting on a weekly basis, and we were quite willing to allow them to put us into government on a strict basis of getting Brexit legislation sorted and then into a general election. But we weren't willing to go into coalitions. We weren't willing to form a national government. They don't usually tend to do too well for Labour administrations, really, and I didn't want Jeremy as Ramsay Mac-Corbyn at any time, no.

UKICE: When Johnson brought his deal back, there were two critical votes. Second reading, which he got, and then went down on the programme motion, a pretext, if you like, for going to a general election. Did you ever consider just letting him get that deal, bringing forward the legislation on his timetable, and putting down a bunch of amendments?

JM: It largely wasn't in our hands because, if we'd have done anything like that, the PLP would have split right down the middle, and it would have been pretty vicious as well. Then that would have allowed Johnson to have a situation where they could have called a general election at any time

realistically, because the SNP were up for an election by that time. Therefore, we would have gone into a general election absolutely split down the middle, completely.

The 2019 general election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Did you ever think it was possible that Labour could, by opposing an election, just basically trapping Johnson in that Parliament?

John McDonnell (JM): I was one of those who, actually, didn't want to welcome a general election. But Jeremy took the view that if there is going to be a general election, we need to go into it confidently, therefore I am going to urge people to vote for it. I think that was most probably the correct judgement. If an election is inevitable, you have to position yourself in a way in which you are not trying to avoid it.

I was more about putting our offer up of 'Why go to an election now when we are in the middle of legislation that could go through? Why don't you move to one side and let us do the negotiations? We will bring something back, then we will have the legislation, then we will go for a general election'.

All the way through I was trying to get us into a position where we were at least seen as offering an alternative route, and at least seen to be trying to take control of the situation. But when the SNP, the Lib Dems jumped ship, you have lost control. The election is going to happen, so you are going to have to go into it confidently.

UKICE: So how much debate was there about the proposition on Brexit that went into the Labour manifesto? It was quite a complicated formula of negotiating a better Labour Brexit and then putting it back to voters.

JM: There wasn't, really. I thought there would be, but there wasn't an awful lot. There was always the view, expressed by some in Shadow Cabinet, that we needed a much more straightforward Brexit line. In the end, there wasn't an awful lot of dissent around the manifesto statement.

UKICE: Did you think, as the campaign kicked off in 2019, that you could

repeat what you had pulled off in 2017, or did it feel different?

JM: It is already written up, so it is not a matter of me leaking anything. I asked Jeremy in, I think it was the July to August, if I could chair the Election Campaign Committee, as I did in 2017. So, by the time we get to Party Conference, I have got the first polling back. That polling demonstrated that we were going to be wiped out. There would be a 150 Tory majority.

This was in the September. I had taken over as chair of the Campaign Committee, and the polling that came back was basically telling us that we were going to be wiped out. There would be a 150 Tory majority, and the campaigning around Brexit that we were doing, whether it was NHS or 'jobs-first Brexit' or whatever, was having no effect whatsoever. Whereas, we were pulling back Remain votes consistently on the messaging that we were doing, which is quite interesting.

So the whole task then, from that September onwards, was to try and, to a certain extent, minimise the damage. But I knew the parlous state that we were in, because we just could not shift the debate in many constituencies away from Brexit, no matter what we did.

UKICE: Was there anything you could have done differently?

JM: Yes. What we could have done is, in terms of overall political strategy, from 2017 to 2019 we possibly could have developed a different narrative generally. Which would, again, maintain the anti-austerity approach and move it on, which could have contextualised Brexit a bit more in other things.

We never got a clear narrative after 2017 to 2019, that either presented a narrative about a different society, a different vision of society, that enabled us then to have the whole panoply of policies, individually assessed of how they would contribute towards creating that vision.

That was our only hope because, looking back on it, I don't think we could have, in any way, bridged the strong views within the Party around Brexit and the strong views of many of our electors. Even though the majority of Labour voters still were Remainers and still wanted some form of People's Vote, when it came down to it there were such large numbers that didn't, and that were

convinced by Brexit.

We couldn't bridge that gap, no matter what, so the only alternative that we had was to find a stronger narrative around other political issues, about the whole nature of the society that we wanted and the way in which we could change it, and how our policies could advance that and benefit people more fundamentally. Then Brexit might have got into that context and had less effect, but we didn't do that.

I think that is our main failure, from 2017 to 2019, whereas up until 2017 there was a clear message, which we communicated. We never had that narrative, between 2017 and 2019, to enable us to withstand that election being a single-issue campaign.

UKICE: Is it fair to say that at the start of the 2019 campaign, it looked like there was maybe a bit of momentum going towards you at the start, which didn't carry on?

JM: A bit. It wasn't significant, though. It was all right. In any election campaign, when it starts, you do start seeing a bit more momentum coming towards you. But, as you went on, that straightforward message around Brexit dominated completely.

If you are producing policies out of a hat that you haven't prepared the ground for, and you need about 18 months to 2 years to consolidate an individual policy, then it looks as though you literally are pulling rabbits out of a hat just to attract votes. But, actually, a lot of those policies, we had been working on for quite a while.

If there had been an election in 2022, as in the normal cycle, we would have had a number of years to bed those down, around a particular narrative. Our main issue is that we never developed a strong enough narrative in which to contextualise Brexit, or in which to have an alternative attraction to Brexit. That was the problem.

UKICE: You said that in 2017, one of the reasons Brexit didn't dominate was because it was an anti-austerity election. Were you surprised by Boris Johnson's capacity to run against the record of the Conservatives over the

previous 10 years?

JM: No. That is what he did in London. Ken Livingstone said that Boris Johnson was the most effective campaigner against him, and it is because there is no ideology to Johnson. As I say, politics for him is a game to be played and to be won. Then it doesn't matter what you say or do, as long as you win, and then you move on very quickly before things catch up with you.

UKICE: And do you get his appeal in a lot of the so-called 'red wall' seats?

JM: I completely understand how you can run that sort of campaign, which is you have a buoyant politician saying anything that people want to hear. But, also – and, again, this sounds like an excuse and I don't mean it to be – look at Justin Schlosberg's reports on that election campaign. He did a report two weeks ago which I was involved in a discussion on. I think it was the filthiest, darkest, dirtiest, most misleading, lying campaign we have ever had in this country.

So, there was a huge negative campaign that was going on, and at the same time, an image creation by Boris Johnson where he would say or do anything to win. Whereas, up until 2017, we did have the ability to have a clear narrative and communication that inspired people, we had lost that. Part of that was about the professional performance around our communications, as well as the sheer contingency of the issue that we were dealing in.

There will be more, I think, looking back on that campaign, that people will learn lessons from. I don't want to exaggerate it too much, but the negative and dark side of that campaign – and I don't say this just from the Labour side – I think it is something that we have got, politically, to address, to be honest.

It was a form of campaigning I don't think we should allow to happen in this country again, really. It is worth looking at some of that research that has been done. There was even a thing that came up in The Mirror yesterday, where there was a young woman who was a Tory Party activist – 65 grand's worth of undeclared expenditure on Facebook ads. The character assassination stuff was quite remarkable.

I told Jeremy at one stage, when we had got him on the ballot paper and he

might win. He said, 'Do you think we are going to win?'. He was worried. He said, 'We might actually win'. I said, 'I think we will. We will see, but, don't worry, if you get anywhere near Number 10 they will assassinate you anyway'. But they did. It was character assassination.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Do you think that the Brexit political divide is here to stay?

John McDonnell (JM): No. I think it will move on. The issue for us is having a proper discussion about what that decision reflected. I think there is so much known and written about that now, about the nature of that vote, the motivation of people and the underlying issues that need to be addressed.

In fact, what is interesting is all this stuff from Johnson about levelling up. I had done a couple of years, every other Saturday, of taking my Treasury team round all these small northern towns and coastal towns, to talk to them about the local economy, the menu of policies that we had, and what additional ideas people had about how we would tackle those particular issues in their communities.

All of that work, we put in there. In government, we would have been able to turn it round, I think, but it was the whole understandable alienation about the way that people had been treated over the last 40 years that they reacted against.

Then that was the irony of it all, actually having them voting against what they thought was the British establishment and being led by elements of the British establishment like Boris Johnson. Quite bizarre, but there you are.

UKICE: Do you think that the tactics that Labour has adopted over the past year, of not particularly critiquing the content of the deal and supporting it, is that basically the most sensible strategy to pursue given where we are?

JM: I think when you are in a crisis like this, it is a bit of a truism that people expect you to work together, but there are ways in which you can do that and be completely straight with people as well.

I will give you an example. Before I stood down as Shadow Chancellor, we submitted all our papers in detail around, for example, the furlough scheme, which was our proposal, and a whole range of other matters.

I remember the Friday afternoon, about five o'clock, Rishi Sunak did the press conference and announced the furlough and package of measures.

Within about 45 minutes, I had to respond in the media. I responded by welcoming the package, but I actually said I was extremely disappointed that it wasn't on the scale that was needed, and there was a whole range of groups that were excluded. We had put in the details of people – the self-employed, people who paid themselves as directors, and all of those – he had missed out completely.

So I said in that interview, 'I really welcome it, but there is a huge number of people here excluded so this is really disappointing and it is not on the scale of support we need'. Literally, for about two days, I was barraged on social media and in the media for being divisive, not rallying round the country in a crisis and all this sort of stuff.

So, you have to be really careful, but, as you move into that phase, what you try and do is, first of all, offer what support you can in the interests of the country. Critique, but, increasingly as you see things going wrong or you are not listened to, that critique has to become more strident, but at the same time you have got to offer an alternative as well.

So when you go on air and you do the criticism and that question comes, 'well, what would you do?', you have got to have that answer. What Keir has successfully done is offer support, critique what the Government is doing, but I think that critique now needs to have moved into a much more strident and angry phase, actually, much sooner. Also, you need to be offering a clear alternative.

Too often, Labour ministers have gone on, and when they are asked that question, 'what would you do?', they have not been clear enough in providing that alternative.

So, I think it has got to move on now quite dramatically, and we will see what

happens in this Budget. Anneliese, I think, has done well, even though she has not been fairly treated by the media.

What I have found with (Rishi) Sunak is that getting him to move on anything is like drawing teeth, it really is. I was meeting with Cabinet and Treasury civil servants, and I found, actually, that in the discussions that we were having, they were extremely responsive, and I thought they got the drift of where we should go. But I think they were having difficulty getting political sign-off on a lot of the things that they were coming up with.

So, I think that part of the problem has been that lack of political leadership and direction. I don't think Johnson is competent. Obviously, he is a good campaigner. I don't think he is competent enough to give that direction needed and Sunak is too slow. My criticism is his response is not big enough and not fast enough on most of these things, but, anyway, we will see. What is good is being able to be a spectator on all of this.