

Carwyn Jones



May 1999 – May 2021

December 2009 – December 2018

23 April 2021

The EU referendum in Wales

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Were you surprised about the commitment in the 2015 Tory manifesto to hold a referendum on our membership of the EU, and did you think Labour should oppose that or support it?

Carwyn Jones (CJ): Well, it wasn't a surprise, in the sense that David Cameron was clearly under pressure from one wing of his party to hold a referendum. I don't think it was much of a shock. I think to hold it when he did was not the right thing to do, but at the time, it wasn't a surprise.

Not just because of the pressure he was under from UKIP, in terms of the votes the Conservatives were losing to them, but also there were a number of MPs in his own party who had become quite hardened Eurosceptics over the years.

UKICE: And why is it you think Euroscepticism was and indeed is a stronger force in Wales than in the other Celtic nations? Were you, at the time, worried about the rise of UKIP in Wales?

CJ: Media, is the answer. You have to bear in mind that 85 per cent of people

in Wales read newspapers that are produced in England. They don't publish Welsh editions; they ignore Wales. So, people read them and they are overwhelmingly Eurosceptic. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, that media penetration isn't there.

So, there is much more of an influence from the English print media on people's thought processes in Wales than is the case, for example, in Scotland and Northern Ireland. That constant Eurosceptic hammering that we saw in a large number of newspapers occurred not just in England, but in Wales as well, but not so much in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

UKICE: Does that apply in reverse, in terms of understanding some of the benefits of the EU to Wales? It's always struck people as interesting that, since Wales benefitted significantly from things like structural funds, that there didn't seem to be much payback for that.

CJ: You have to remember that the reasons for the Brexit vote in Wales were very varied, it wasn't all to do with Europe. When I talk to people, by far the biggest answer I had was they wanted to kick David Cameron. Nothing to do with Europe. But they'd say to me, 'We're still Labour, but we want to kick David Cameron'.

There were others who came in on immigration, even though it's a tiny issue in Wales.

There were yet others, and I heard this many times, who basically wanted to protest against globalisation. They didn't put it that way. But they'd say, for example, 'My father was underground or on the steelworks, it was a hard job, but it was a good job, well-paid. Union recognition, pension at the end of the end of it. I've got none of those things. I've got two jobs, I'm on a zero-hours contract, someone is to blame for this'.

And for a lot of people, this was their opportunity to blame somebody for the economic conditions that they found themselves in, because of globalisation. So, there was certainly that element as well.

UKICE: As First Minister, did you have any contacts with David Cameron, in your role about the details of the referendum or indeed any of his negotiating

strategy in his renegotiations?

CJ: No. The only discussion I had with David Cameron was over the timing of the referendum. I remember him saying to me, 'I want to hold it in June of 2016'. Bear in mind, this was six weeks after there had been elections in Wales, elections in Scotland and, of course, elections in London.

And I said to him, 'Please don't hold it in June. We need a cross-party campaign to ensure success. We cannot put that together. We'll have spent weeks knocking lumps out of each other, our activists will all be tired. There is no way we can put forward an all-party campaign or a cross-party campaign in six weeks'.

I said to him, 'Hold it in the autumn, when people are ready, refreshed and can work together cross-party'. He wouldn't listen. I think he was gripped by the idea that he had won the referendum in Scotland in 2014 and so would do the same again.

What a lot of Labour voters saw was a fight between Tories. And they decided that they liked David Cameron the least, and so voted for Brexit. Not everybody, of course, but for a lot of people, they voted Brexit through sheer dislike of David Cameron.

Because there was no great Labour presence. We tried our best to rally ourselves, post the May 2016 election. It took us weeks to set up a government, and all of a sudden, there was a referendum thrown at us. The timing couldn't have been worse.

The Welsh Government's Brexit policy

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): On 24 June, as you pondered the outcome, what did you think the referendum meant? What sort of Brexit did you think would happen?

Carwyn Jones (CJ): Nobody knew what Brexit would look like. Everybody thought, as they'd been told in the campaign, that it would be a Brexit with a deal, perhaps a free trade agreement. People on the Brexit side talked about EFTA and having that kind of arrangement with the EU. That was all forgotten

about, after the referendum. And then people interpreted it in their own way.

That was the problem. When you have a referendum when there is a simple question, trying to interpret the result is actually hugely difficult. And of course, then we spent three years trying to work out exactly what it meant. We have a supposed deal with the EU, but it isn't working out as it was meant to. And I think this will drag on for many, many years. Unless there's an arrangement that's far clearer, it will be very difficult.

My wife is from Belfast, and I knew what the problem would be in Northern Ireland. People said to me, 'We're an island'. I would say, 'You're not an island. We've got a land border. And we will have, as the UK, a land border with the EU.' And people couldn't fathom that at all, they couldn't their heads around it.

Because people in Britain seem to think that a border is something that's got barbed wire on it, and Steve McQueen is trying to jump over it on a motorbike. That's not what borders look like. And people couldn't get their head around the fact that there will be a large, unpoliceable, land border with the Republic. And I pointed that out at the time. No-one seemed to take any notice. And hey ho, here we are.

That issue is unresolvable. It's unresolvable, other than by having a Northern Ireland protocol or by the UK joining the customs union. There is no other way to resolve it. So, that was on my mind as well, given where my wife is from.

UKICE: What sort of work did you in the Welsh Government set in train straight after the referendum? Did you just sit and wait for London to work out who was going to be Prime Minister and how the Government was going to handle things forward?

CJ: We followed our own proposals. We produced a white paper, together with Plaid Cymru, on what we thought would be a reasonable way forward. So, we made our position very, very clear. We had done our detailed work long before the UK Government did, in terms of what we thought Brexit could look like.

We were never in the position of saying, 'Let's try and overturn the referendum', that was never the case – though that was how some people

tried to present it. But it was a case of, 'We've got this result, how can we now make it work, respecting the result, but ensuring we get least disruption possible'. And we put forward that White Paper, we launched it.

But Whitehall doesn't listen. There is an arrogance in Whitehall that anything that comes from outside Whitehall is somehow of a lower standard than anything that emanates from within. And that's been the case, I think, forever and a day. And that's the way they looked at it. And then they waded into their own mess, as a result.

UKICE: Did you start doing preparations for Brexit pre-referendum?

CJ: No. No-one did. Preparations for what? If this was going to be a Leave vote, nobody really knew what the outcome might be. There were so many different scenarios that were possible, from a hard Brexit with no deal to EFTA membership/ All that work would have had to have been done after the referendum, having understood what the common ground was between the different Brexiters.

UKICE: And were you, by contrast, deeply involved in discussions inside the national Labour Party, about their approach to this?

CJ: Yes. I mean, bear in mind, of course, that Welsh Labour operate wholly autonomously from the rest of the party, when it comes to devolved issues. We developed our own policy long before there was a settled view, really, in the UK party.

And there were different views in the UK party as well, from some who would have loved to have had a second referendum and to overturn the result, to others who saw it as an opportunity to provide support for British industry in a way that wasn't possible under the customs union, and under the structures the EU had in place.

So, there was a variety of views. It was difficult to get to a position of common ground within the Labour Party.

UKICE: You produced your document in January 2017. But the Prime Minister had already made clear that that wasn't the sort of Brexit she was really going

for in her October 2016 Party Conference Speech.

So, did you really think you were producing proposals that had any chance of getting traction in Westminster? Or was this basically just distancing yourself from the sort of Brexit she was about to pursue?

CJ: A bit of both, if I'm honest. Inevitably, there are politics involved. But it was a genuine attempt to put forward an alternative. What we didn't know is what sort of Brexit she wanted. We knew what she didn't want, but no-one had any idea of the kind of Brexit that the UK Government wanted and whether it was achievable.

So, it was important to put forward proposals that could be looked at, as others would have done, in order to come to a position of a Brexit that people could have lived with, and to see where the common ground was.

UKICE: One of the things that a lot of Labour MPs, particularly in Leave voting seats, thought they could not be seen to be arguing for was any continuation of free movement. But your document did suggest a continuation of free movement, which the EU would make a condition of continued membership of the Single Market. Was that difficult to sell back in Wales?

CJ: Inevitably, there are some things that you have to put forward as part of a package that some people won't like. But when you look at the overall package, it works. I mean, we did look at how we could have a modified system of freedom of movement, where people could come if they had a job. Which I think most people found quite reasonable, actually.

For a lot of people, they had this idea in their heads that people came from other EU countries to sit on the dole. How many times did I hear that one? Actually, if you look at the rules on freedom of movement, they're actually not to do with freedom of movement of people, they are freedom of movement of labour.

What happened was that the UK, at the time of Tony Blair, took a very expansive view of what freedom of movement of labour meant, and that then meant freedom of movement of people. That's not what the rules say.

So, in our document, we interpreted that as, if it's freedom of movement of labour, it means freedom of movement in order to get to a job.

If you look at the regulations and take a literal interpretation, that's what they actually say. And that was our argument.

So we suggested, if you've got a job and you lose it, you've got a certain amount of time to look for another one, or you have to leave. To our mind, that was in accordance with the rules on freedom of movement.

UKICE: Did you have any discussion with the EU about what you were going to put in your document before you published it?

CJ: I met with Barnier several times, but we didn't consult with them, in terms of what would be in the document. But nobody pushed back on us on that. Nobody in the EU came back to us and said, 'Your interpretation of freedom of movement is wrong'.

UKICE: And did you run the document by the Labour Party in London, before it was published?

CJ: Yes, I think we probably did, looking back on it. Not that the Labour Party in London would have had any kind of veto over it, but we would normally do that as a matter of courtesy to our colleagues. But it was a Welsh Government document that had the support of Plaid Cymru. So, it was jointly developed, in that sense.

UKICE: Was it easy to get the support of Plaid for a cross-party approach?

CJ: Yes, it was reasonably. We were in a similar position. And we took the view that we wanted to extend beyond just one party, and of course, we had one Liberal Democrat in government anyway so, in a sense, it was across three parties.

Inter-governmental relations, 2017-2019

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we turn to the way in which, throughout this process, the UK Government ran inter-governmental relations, I think

Theresa May, very soon after becoming Prime Minister, did a tour to the capitals. I think she came over to Cardiff, shortly after becoming Prime Minister. Did that lead you to believe there was going to be a genuine, cross-four nations approach to the Brexit discussions?

Carwyn Jones (CJ): No, is the simple answer. Theresa May is not somebody who gives a lot of things away. I didn't get much out of her. Theresa tended to repeat in private, in meetings, what she was saying in public. So lines, basically. And you never really got much beyond the lines she was using in public. But I didn't get the impression at that point that there would be some kind of collegiate approach, shall we say, to Brexit.

UKICE: Were the Joint Ministerial Committees (JMCs) on the European negotiations useful as a forum for discussing what was going on?

CJ: They were mainly an opportunity for UK Governments to report back to us and tell us what they thought they could tell us. The problem was, the Scottish Government were in a completely different position to where we were. As far as they were concerned, they wanted to be back in the EU, because that's what Scotland had voted for. So, it was always going to be difficult.

For the Scottish Government, the solution to the issue of Brexit was to leave the UK and to re-join the EU. Well, there was never going to be much common ground in those circumstances.

UKICE: What was the atmosphere in those committees like?

CJ: In almost all of the nine years that I was First Minister, when there was a Conservative government, the atmosphere in the JMC was always lively. The problem you've got with the JMC is that it could be a forum for governments to come together and work out common frameworks. There are things we have in common, that we could do together, but that's not what it is.

The JMC Plenary, which meets once a year with heads of government, is basically a list of complaints. The Prime Minister sits opposite the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, who reel off a list of grievances, and they sit and nod at us. It was, in many ways, a waste of time. It could be much better as a forum for discussion.

So, there was no discussion at all. I understand why, because it was very difficult for the UK Government to have a discussion about Brexit with the SNP there, who were in a very different position. We had accepted the referendum result, after seeing how Wales had voted. We weren't going to overturn things, but we wanted to get the best Brexit possible, as far as Wales is concerned. But of course, for Scotland, the approach was very different.

Trying to get common ground, when you've got one government that doesn't want to be in the room, because it doesn't want to be part of the state, is tough.

UKICE: Do you think, if it had been 52/48 Remain in Wales, that you would have been able to have a slightly different approach? How important was the fact that Wales had narrowly voted to Leave in conditioning what you could do?

CJ: I'm not sure that it would have changed our approach. We just took the view that, this is the result, and we've just got to get on with it and get the best result we can. Above all costs, let's avoid a hard Brexit, which is, to my mind, the hard line Union Jack-wearing nationalists, who do not represent the majority of people who voted for Brexit.

UKICE: If the top-level plenary sessions were not working, did you get the impression from your colleagues and your officials that bilateral contacts between departments were working any better on other concrete issues that needed to be discussed?

CJ: I'm not sure that everything was shared with us, to be honest. I think the great worry in Whitehall was, 'If we give this to the Welsh, they will, in some way, leak it'. We were never going to do that, because it wasn't in our own interest to do that. If we want to get access to sensitive information, we've got to keep it confidential, otherwise we're not going to get anymore.

But that's not the way they operate in Whitehall. I'm not sure that they really felt comfortable sharing some of the information that they had. They couldn't give us more than they gave the Scots, and they actively did not trust the Scots. So, there was a limit as to how much information we were being given, I suspect.

UKICE: What about feeding in the concerns of Welsh farmers and Welsh business at this stage or, indeed, at later stages? Did you get the sense that the Government was willing to take on any of your concerns?

CJ: We just got vague answers. When you raised specific issues, the answers were always, 'It will be fine', or along those lines, because they didn't have any more detail to share. No-one had any answers. If you look, for example, at the sheep meat sector in Wales, it's very dependent on export. Without export, it collapses, because the price collapses. None of that had been thought through at all.

I think that the Civil Service in Whitehall, and much of the Government, was caught by surprise by the referendum result, so that there were no plans in place in the event of a Leave vote. Nothing had really been thought through. I think I'm right in saying that David Cameron effectively said that nobody could make any preparations for a vote to Leave, because that would give the impression that we were planning for such an eventuality.

And of course, that eventuality did occur.

After that, they played catch-up. What you have to remember is that the negotiation between the UK and the EU is not an equal one. The EU's negotiators are far more experienced than the negotiators the UK have. The UK hasn't negotiated a treaty with another entity for more than 50 years, the expertise isn't there.

So, it was always going to be the case that the EU would have the upper hand, because they had the people and the experience, and they were the bigger market. There was a naivety there, I think, on behalf of the UK, in thinking, 'This is easy, we can just go into this and we'll have a deal in no time at all'.

UKICE: Were you concerned at any of these stages that you weren't getting enough staff, or that you couldn't fund enough people, to help deal with Brexit in Wales? Or did the money just flow through so that you could at least meet the administrative tasks that came as a result of Brexit?

CJ: It was tough, because there was a lot of work to do, particularly in terms of drafting regulations and so on in the post-Brexit world. We just didn't have the

kind of depth that Whitehall had in terms of sheer numbers.

I was very fortunate in the sense that the people I had were really good. We had a really good team of senior civil servants in charge of this in Wales. But if one or two of them had gone under a bus, we'd have struggled. But I was fortunate in the people that I had, and the fact that they stayed around.

In terms of depth, there were some issues. One of the things we had to take a decision on early on were the technical regulations that needed to be drafted. We just let Whitehall get on with it, because it wasn't a good use of our time to draft parallel regulations that were completely uncontroversial. We were happy to let them get on with it, rather than smother our lawyers with work that actually wasn't productive, because we weren't looking at doing anything different.

But it is difficult when you've got a Civil Service like ours, which is small. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is vast, compared to ours. At one point, there were nine times more civil servants in Northern Ireland than there were in Wales. I'm not sure that is the case anymore. But yes, it's a lot easier if you've got a big Civil Service with a lot of depth, and we didn't have that.

UKICE: How closely did you work with the Scottish Government at this stage, and did that relationship become closer over time?

CJ: We worked together where we could, but sometimes there would come a point where it just wasn't possible to go any further, such as on where powers would rest when they came back from Brussels, and how those powers would be activated, and where those powers needed to be activated jointly between all the devolved governments.

The Scots just couldn't sign up to it. I don't think they were necessarily opposed to it, but they could not bring themselves to sign up to any kind of agreement with the UK Government.

With Northern Ireland, you've got two very separate views between the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, so getting an agreement between the two of them is a challenge. So yes, we worked with the Scots where we could, but there were occasions where their political objectives meant that they would go

off in a different direction to us.

UKICE: Back in June 2017, you produced a document suggesting something similar to a Council of Ministers for the UK with an independent secretariat running the post-Brexit UK. A bit like the Council of Ministers in the EU.

I think you were very notable for being the only government that produced some positive proposals about shared governance. Did you ever think that there was any prospect that this might get buy-in from the UK Government or any of the other 'devolveds', and that it could actually provide a basis for running the UK after Brexit?

CJ: There was buy-in at the time. Things changed after that. But bear in mind that the Council of Ministers was an important cog in the way the Single Market worked, and the way the EU worked overall. There needed to be a UK equivalent to preserve a Single Market of the UK, and to my mind, that meant the four governments had to come together and agree a way forward. What we've had is one government telling us what to do.

The Internal Market Act has been badly handled and will wreck the UK, there is no question about that. Because the UK Government has a conflict of interest it cannot resolve – that the government of the UK is also the government of England. So, the suspicion is always that the UK Government will do something to the benefit of England, and no-one else counts.

So, working together was hugely important. You can't just leave this to the UK Government. They're not neutral, they're not objective, they will do what they think is best for England, basically.

We needed to have a mechanism where all four governments could sit down and agree a way forward. A common framework on agriculture, a common framework on fisheries, so that everybody is happy, everybody is agreed, and everybody is content with the arrangements.

The Internal Market Act is bitterly opposed by both the Scottish and Welsh governments, and with good reason. The Internal Market Act is a mess. We will end up in court every week, with the way that that has been drafted, whereas

it could have been done in a much more cooperative way. Mechanisms could have been put in place to pursue the same objective, which we all agreed on – not to have any artificial barriers within the UK's own internal single market. And I think that would have been far better in terms of the future of the UK.

I think that if the Internal Market Act is followed to the fullest degree by UK Government, the UK will not survive. Because so much grievance will be stored up, that the union will fall apart.

UKICE: Did the Labour Party support the proposals in Brexit and devolution paper that you produced?

CJ: I think they were neutral on it. But since then, there has undoubtedly been a change in favour of moving in that direction. No question about that.

The thing is, politics in the UK is dominated by Westminster and the way Westminster thinks. Inevitably, because of its size. But sometimes, it's not easy to see the difficulties that causes for Scotland and Wales. The obsession with parliamentary sovereignty – if indeed it exists, but that's for another time – means that there is still this view that Westminster sits above everyone else, and so Westminster should be the parliament that decides on the way things work across the UK.

Whilst there is, in constitutional theory, a hierarchy of parliaments, there is no hierarchy of governments. The UK Government has certain powers, through prerogative and through powers given to it by statute, but there is no supremacy of the UK Government.

So, it wouldn't be right to say that, institutionally, the UK Government has the right to do things across the UK, because that's not the way constitutional settlement works.

UKICE: Did you get Plaid's backing for this document?

CJ: We got it. I launched it together with Leanne Wood, who was the then Plaid leader, in London.

UKICE: Did you get any positive reaction from the other parties in the Senedd?

CJ: No. We had the Conservatives and UKIP there. The Conservatives just followed whatever line they were given from London. UKIP just saw it as a plot to overturn the referendum. There was no way of getting any common ground.

UKICE: Not necessarily as a direct outcome of your proposals, but shortly afterwards we did see discussion in the JMC and the announcement that the Government would come up with principles of common frameworks to do that. Did you think that was actually a major step forward and a recognition of at least some of the ideas you'd expressed in that paper?

CJ: Yes, because that's what we agreed with them. I was involved in a negotiation with David Lidington and we got an agreement. We agreed on the way forward, we agreed on the powers we would possess, and how they might be used in the future. Some powers we decided would sit, as it were, in a proverbial cabinet, and wouldn't be used until everybody agreed to bring them out and use jointly, across the UK.

So, that was a good outcome. The Scottish Government found they couldn't sign up to that, that they just couldn't bring themselves to go that far. But we had that agreement. And it was a great example of what can be achieved between two governments, above politics, in terms of finding a practical way forward. Unfortunately, since then, it's moved towards imposition rather than agreement.

UKICE: The Welsh Government decided to back the Miller case over Article 50. Why did you decide to get involved in that? What was the thinking behind backing that?

CJ: It was hugely important that we were able to intervene legally, to make representations on behalf of the Welsh Government. It's not unusual for interested parties to intervene in a legal case, to show that they have an interest, but also to show that they may want to make submissions with regard to the case itself. And that would be a pretty normal thing for us to do.

UKICE: When the Government introduced its great repeal bill, the EU withdrawal bill, later that year, you described it as a fundamental assault on devolution. But ultimately, you gave it legislative consent. Can you just talk us through your attitude to that and how you moved from finding it fundamentally

unacceptable to giving it legislative consent? Was in response to pressure from London?

CJ: Well, pressure from London would have had the opposite effect in those circumstances.

The reason why, if I remember rightly, we gave legislative consent was because we had the agreement with the UK Government on where powers should rest and how they would be utilised in the future. As a result of that agreement, we were then able to give consent.

UKICE: So your tactics worked quite well, of withholding and then insisting on some assurances?

CJ: Yes. And to be fair, I think the UK Government saw the sense in what we were proposing. They wouldn't have agreed to it if they thought we were talking nonsense. But because of the agreement that we struck, we were then able to give legislative consent. The Scots couldn't bring themselves to do that.

You can't spend your time looking for an agreement and then saying you're never going to agree on something. So, from our perspective, we thought, 'This is a good deal for us, we can agree it', and on that basis, we gave consent.

UKICE: The joint framework and the agreement was struck with David Lidington. Did you find him a good person to do business with?

CJ: Yes, is the answer. Part of the problem we've always had in dealing with the UK Government is that, quite often, you'll go to meetings and there is a different minister there every time. So you can't build up any kind of relationship with them, and they're often unaware of what's happened in previous meetings.

When you have one person you can talk to, it makes it a lot easier to come to terms, and to come to an agreement. And that's what we did with David. This wasn't us telling the UK Government what to do. This was a proper agreement between two governments, that worked for both governments.

UKICE: During 2018, the Prime Minister was trying to negotiate her Brexit, keep her Cabinet together and then start to get her deal through Parliament. At what stage in that process did you start to think that there might be a no-deal Brexit? To what extent you were actually working with Whitehall on preparations for no deal?

CJ: There weren't any preparations. There weren't any preparations at all in the ports, up until quite recently. It's not possible to prepare for a no-deal Brexit. There are no preparations, there is nothing you can do to mitigate it. The UK Government was never going to look seriously at preparing for a no-deal Brexit, because that's not what they wanted.

They threatened it, of course, but that's not what anybody wanted. So, there was no planning for a no-deal Brexit. The planning involved putting up barriers, that's pretty much it. We could see no evidence of any kind of planning that needed to be done, in terms of the way the ports would operate, and the border would operate, particularly. None of that was done.

UKICE: With the UK Government being so preoccupied with Brexit and its parliamentary difficulties, were there other things that you wanted, needed, to discuss with the UK Government that just got crowded out? Or were you able to get on with your business?

CJ: Brexit was the only game in town. All discussions were about Brexit. We had our own legislative programme, but there was an awful lot of secondary legislation that needed to be drafted, on the back of Brexit. A lot of it was uncontroversial, but it needed to be done. But in reality, politics was dominated entirely by Brexit, and very little else.

UKICE: There were noises at that stage about running an independent trade policy in the rounds between Liam Fox and Michael Gove, which obviously has very big agricultural components with regards to chicken and growth hormone beef and other things like that. Were you at all involved in any of the thinking coming out of the Department for International Trade about what future trade agreements might look like? Was the Welsh Government regarded as a stakeholder in those discussions?

CJ: There were discussions between other of my ministers and the UK

Government, not through me. My link was to more senior people, rather than with civil servants. So, those discussions would have taken place. But the problem was, no-one had any real idea what any of this meant and what the effect would be. What is an independent trade policy?

There wasn't really any consensus in the UK Government as to what UK trade policy would look like. Some thought it would look like a kind of European Singapore. There were others who saw it as an opportunity to become more protectionist. There was a real spectrum of views there.

There were some who wanted to strike a deal and who wanted to preserve and enhance social stability and economic stability for individuals. And there were others who wanted to strip all that away.

That is still the problem in the UK Government; nobody really knows what kind of future they envisage for the UK. And those two viewpoints are very difficult to reconcile.

UKICE: Some of the big issues for Wales were to do with the future of the structural funds after we left the EU, and the future of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments, of which Wales is quite a big beneficiary. Were you having discussions about how some of the assurances in the manifesto on continuity of funding would be met, and how the Welsh Government would be involved in distributing funds?

CJ: The answer is always, 'It will be fine', but with no detail. The reality is there is no money. After next year, £600m goes down to zero. There has been no real discussion as to what agricultural support might look like. There's got to be a commonality of rules in terms of a framework between the different countries in the UK, but there has to be flexibility as to how that support is applied.

Because agriculture in Wales is very different from, for example, agriculture in much of England. I mean, the arable sector in Wales is very small. In England, it's quite substantial, particularly in the flatter areas, such as Lincolnshire, where arable is very important.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for years,

had this obsession with big factory farms, the bigger the better, and family farms were a bit of an anachronism to them; we took quite a different view. There has to be flexibility to tailor support according to the circumstances of each country.

But we just don't know. The UK Government is talking about the Shared Prosperity Fund, but no-one has the faintest idea how that will operate or how much money will be in it. They've had plenty of time to come up with it, but all they've done is try to ensure that the devolved governments have no role. Well, that doesn't work. You can't have a rival government spending money on rival schemes, it's insane.

But we wait and see. As I say, nothing has come forward yet, in terms of what might approach European funding.

A further referendum on Brexit

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When it comes to the Labour Party itself, how much interaction did you have with Jeremy Corbyn or his immediate entourage about their evolving Brexit position?

Carwyn Jones (CJ): Not a huge amount. I mean, we had done a lot more and had gone into a lot more detail than they had. And in many ways, we were leading the way. There was a dilemma within the Labour Party, and that was, how far can we push the idea of a good deal for Britain without appearing to look as if we want to overturn the referendum? I think we did go too far, actually.

In 2019, a chunk of our own voters, who had voted for Brexit, took the view that we were trying to overturn the result of the referendum. And that didn't help us. There was a difficulty that a lot of voters felt that we weren't prepared to accept the result. That did hit us hard in 2019.

UKICE: Was there ever a time, while you were in office, that you pondered coming out publicly in favour of a second referendum?

CJ: No. Because what concerned me was that, in 1997, we had our devolution referendum, and the result was similar, in terms of a narrow victory for one

side. I remember the Conservative Party arguing that there should be another referendum because the result was close. I argued strongly against that.

Well, I can hardly turn around and make the exact opposite argument when it came to the Brexit referendum, 'It was a close referendum, so let's run it again'. Because I opposed that position, back in 1997 with the devolution referendum, which was close, but there was a result. And I'm afraid it's the same with this one. It just wouldn't have been a tenable position to take, simply because it suited my viewpoint.

UKICE: Were you privately making the case for a referendum?

CJ: No. My view was always, 'We just need to get a better deal'. Some people said to me, 'Let's have a multi-option referendum'. I think that's very difficult. How do you work out who has won if you have a multi-question referendum? It's quite tough.

I was moving in that direction, if I'm fair. But only because I couldn't see any other way of resolving the issue. That was the problem. I was very reluctant to go down that line, given what I said before.

But I got to the point where I just thought, 'Hang on a second, how are we going to resolve this? What kind of Brexit do people want? And do they want Brexit at all, now they know what the difficulties are?' I wasn't comfortable with the position, but I go to the point where I thought, 'I can't see how else we're going to resolve this'.

The future of Welsh politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When it comes to the Labour Party itself, how much interaction did you have with Jeremy Corbyn or his immediate entourage about their evolving Brexit position?

Carwyn Jones (CJ): Not a huge amount. I mean, we had done a lot more and had gone into a lot more detail than they had. And in many ways, we were leading the way. There was a dilemma within the Labour Party, and that was, how far can we push the idea of a good deal for Britain without appearing to look as if we want to overturn the referendum? I think we did go too far,

actually.

In 2019, a chunk of our own voters, who had voted for Brexit, took the view that we were trying to overturn the result of the referendum. And that didn't help us. There was a difficulty that a lot of voters felt that we weren't prepared to accept the result. That did hit us hard in 2019.

UKICE: Was there ever a time, while you were in office, that you pondered coming out publicly in favour of a second referendum?

CJ: No. Because what concerned me was that, in 1997, we had our devolution referendum, and the result was similar, in terms of a narrow victory for one side. I remember the Conservative Party arguing that there should be another referendum because the result was close. I argued strongly against that.

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UKICE: Did Brexit present any opportunities for Wales? You mentioned agriculture, but were there any other areas where you were keen for Wales to do things differently from England or the UK, as you looked at the repatriation of powers?

CJ: Well, yes. From our perspective, we wanted to make sure that the powers held in Brussels came straight to us, that they didn't go through the filter of Whitehall. That said, we did recognise that there were some powers that couldn't be exercised independently by each government, because that would damage the internal market of the UK, which is important to us.

And there are issues. The internal market is at risk from distortive subsidies, but the Act leaves the issue entirely in the hands of a Whitehall minister, and not in the hands of all four governments. I've got no faith at all in that system, or that UK ministers would be fair at all. So, an opportunity has been missed there.

What was important was that power should rest in Wales, whilst recognising that some powers shouldn't be exercised independently, or that each government shouldn't exercise some powers independently of each other, because of the need to preserve the UK's internal single market.

But the biggest issue for us was, how do we ensure that we can still export? Because exports to the EU were by far our biggest share of the export market, not just for farming, but for many other industries as well. When you've had access to a very large market for a long time, putting up barriers between you and that large market is bound to cause complications, depending on what those barriers look like.

UKICE: Do you think there is any prospect that a future government could pick up your governance ideas for running the UK after Brexit? For example, when the issue with Scotland calms down slightly. Do you think that is a long-term direction, or are we now in a situation where we really have to look at more radical constitutional change, to hold the UK together?

CJ: We need radical constitutional change, and I have outlined what I think we should do several times. To simply carry on as we are will mean that the Union will not exist, in my view. I think the pressures on it now are enormous. I think it

is possible to create a voluntary union of four different entities, to have a system that recognises that partnership approach, rather than the top-down approach that we have at the moment.

Whether that is something that can be done to avoid Scottish independence, I don't know. Independence in Wales, for example, is at its highest levels of support that I've ever seen. Still a long way from a majority, but amongst the young people particularly, it's 50/50 pretty much.

Welsh independence, in this particular election (Senedd elections 2021), is now an issue, which was never the case in the past. Because taking back control can be used by others, who say, 'Okay, let's have Wales take back control, let's have Scotland take back control'.

The UK is a union like the EU, at the end of the day. It's a little bit older, with its current boundaries, and there are closer connections between countries, of course. But people will remain part of a union if they think it benefits them. As soon as people think they're better off out, they'll leave it. We saw that with the Brexit referendum, we might see it with Scotland – personally, I hope not – and even with Wales, in years to come.

The UK Government has no answer to this at all, beyond smothering people with Union Jacks. 'Let's try and recreate the wartime sense of nationality', that's just stupidity. Those days are long, long gone. And they have the opportunity to create a UK that will last, or a UK that will fall apart, because their version of the union and their version of identity and nationality is not shared by so many people in Scotland, Wales, and particularly Northern Ireland.

UKICE: Looking back, do you think that even before the referendum, UK devolved relations were in quite a bad state, and that we hadn't been paying enough attention to managing those relations, which caused a whole bunch of problems, such as the issues tackled in the Dunlop Review?

CJ: I think the problem lies in the fact that the JMC was set up by a Labour government at a time when there was a Labour First Minister in Wales, a Labour First Minister in Scotland. Northern Ireland is a little bit different, but it was generally thought that the JMC would be made up of people who largely

agreed with each other.

And when, of course, you then have different governments in different parts of the UK, that's when it began to show its problems. It will be quite clear that the JMC was basically a place where people went to argue, rather than a place where people could go and work out the solutions to common problems, which is possible, regardless of party.

But unfortunately, it isn't doing that at the moment. It could do much more, that would certainly help to ensure the sustainability of the UK. But at the moment, the JMC contributes nothing, in that sense.