

## Tom Baldwin

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### Labour's EU policy, 2010 - 2016

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Did David Cameron's decision to make the Bloomberg speech and support a referendum surprise you?

**Tom Baldwin (TB):** No, you could see it coming a mile off because so much of British politics over the previous decade had been driven by the internal dynamics of the Conservative Party. This Eurosceptic tail was wagging the dog of the party so hard that at some point it became hard to tell the tail from the body. Throughout Cameron's whole leadership, he was always looking over his shoulder at them, from when he first started running for Tory Leader and he made his move on leaving the European People's Party.

The question for Ed (Miliband) and for the Labour Party in that period was whether we would try and pre-empt him and propose a referendum ourselves. There were people in the Shadow Cabinet who were very tempted to do that. I think people like Ed Balls and Jon Cruddas were among them.

On one level, you can see it would have been cute politics. But to Ed Miliband's credit, he resisted that and said it wasn't the right thing to do for the country. Europe at that time was an obsession of the Conservative Party, not of the country. It was the obsession of various sections of the media, not of the country. I think polls showed that Europe was around number 6 or 7 on the

list that people told pollsters were the biggest problems facing Britain.

Therefore, while it was tempting to play politics with the internal dynamics of the Conservative Party simply for our own electoral interest, it wasn't the right thing to do. And, if you aspire to be a government of the country, you should have instincts that you will do the right thing by the country. Ed resisted the lure of a referendum again after Cameron had proposed one and lots of people thought we would have to follow suit.

That was another quite difficult battle within the Labour Party at that time. It was another episode that showed Ed as a principled leader who was determined to do the right thing and focus on the priorities and policies which would actually improve people's lives rather than just embroil them in endless political battles and make them prone to polarising influences.

We did the right thing. But I don't think we sold it very well. Even when we announced our policy opposing a referendum, we confused the messaging. At some people's insistence, we had this ridiculous referendum "lock" where we were promising a referendum if there was another big constitutional change in the EU that impinged on UK sovereignty. The idea was to look like we were actually proposing a referendum even though we were opposing a referendum. I don't think anybody quite understood what our message was and it fell, as so often was the case with some of our initiatives, into the category of mush. The problem was once again, pressure from parts of the Shadow Cabinet and some of the polling people.

**UKICE:** Do you think you could have made it more of an issue in the election campaign in 2015, or was there just too much public support for it to make it worth your while?

**TB:** We tried, we really did. I think we had one day, right at the start of the campaign, where we managed to get some media focus on what we thought was an incredibly reckless and irresponsible policy by David Cameron to have an in-out referendum and all the destabilisation that might cause. We just couldn't get anything for it.

We had a media which was, frankly, obsessed with Scotland. Every single BBC political correspondent would take it in turns to go up and do a ground-

breaking report on the SNP breaking through in Scotland and what that meant for the future of British politics. They just weren't interested in the idea that we were going to have an in-out referendum on Europe and what that would mean.

You would say it until you were blue in the face and they would say, 'Yes, but trouble is James Landale's heading for Scotland now. So we've got to do Scotland again'. We just couldn't get it going. Business was a problem too. None of them spoke out against Cameron. They collectively decided that the biggest danger to their growth was Ed's interventionist policies – half of which have since been done anyway – rather than leaving the world's biggest free trading area. I'm not sure their risk management was up to scratch on that one.

**UKICE:** I am interested that you say Jon Cruddas was one of the people who flirted with this idea, because the Cruddas Report into the 2015 election came out just before the referendum, and it spoke about the divide that we have done nothing but speak about since within the Labour Party, between socially conservative and socially liberal voters.

**TB:** I'm pretty sure Jon Cruddas was a Remainer back then but he thought that it was good politics to be seen to be giving people the choice about Europe. He thought us standing in the way of that was a mistake, and I remember him saying it specifically. He was certainly one of those who didn't back calls for new referendum after 2016. Jon is a great man – but I guess we disagreed on that.

**UKICE:** Were you at all involved in the referendum campaign?

**TB:** No. I watched it from a distance. I occasionally spoke to Will Straw to vent my frustration and whinge, which must have been very annoying for him. There is nothing worse than retired armchair generals telling you what to do when you generally know what the problems are. It wasn't his fault that Remain had become a sort of Tory campaign. Before this interview I had to look up the slogan for Stronger In because I had forgotten it, which shows probably one of the mistakes. It was 'Stronger, Safer, Better Off'. That was straight out of the Cameron-Osborne playbook – security, competence, prosperity – but they were trying to mobilise a largely Labour Remain base with a Tory campaign.

You needed a campaign which spoke more to Labour values, which spoke to who we are as a country, and why our future belongs in Europe. You needed to have something which felt much more collective and rallying and much more Labour.

I just think that Cameron and Osborne – as two the most arrogant, smuggest and shallowest politicians ever – thought that they were serial winners and they didn't need to do anything apart from occasionally wheel out Jeremy Corbyn or Ed Miliband or A.N. Other Labour Person, because they thought that is all you need to do to get that Labour vote.

They didn't understand Labour voters and, in the end, one of the chief reasons Remain lost was that not enough Labour voters came out to vote for Dave and George.

**UKICE:** Was anyone making that case for a more Labour oriented campaign to Cameron and Osborne?

**TB:** Yes. I am pretty sure Will Straw did. But it was a very, very Tory dominated campaign. I don't think Alan Johnson had much purchase.

One of the reasons why people like him is that he's a truly lovely man and not like other politicians. But I'm not sure he was in a great position or necessarily the right person to impose his will on the likes of Cameron and Osborne. There were also, as has been well-documented, problems with the Leader's Office and Jeremy Corbyn at the time because they didn't want to be part of what they thought of as a neo-liberal campaign.

I remember being vaguely involved with Ed Miliband's speech at the time, where you were told that, 'Stronger In cleared the grid because this was a Labour Day and this was going to be a Labour moment'. It was like painting by numbers, 'We will do a Labour Day and let Labour have some say and that will get out some Labour voters'. That is not a strategy, that is just a grid.

From the very marginal involvement I had with it, it felt there was quite a big disconnect between the need to mobilise more Labour voters, more young people, and the measures they were taking to do so.

**UKICE:** Presumably the bulk of the responsibility for that lies with the Labour leadership rather than with the Tory leadership, in the sense that they were so half-baked about campaigning?

**TB:** Responsibility lies with both sides. I think the structure of the campaign was wrong, because it was very Tory top-heavy and it felt and smelt like a Tory campaign. That in turn made it harder for someone like Jeremy Corbyn to have anything to do with it. But I also think the Labour campaign for Remain was not distinct enough, not dynamic enough. So, there is a lot of fault on all sides, but as I say, I am speaking as someone who was not on the pitch. I know it always looks a lot easier sitting up in the stands.

**UKICE:** Would you argue the reverse as well, that a red bus with 'NHS' blazoned on the side showed that the Leave Campaign actually understood Labour voters quite well?

**TB:** They were certainly pitching at Labour voters with that. There seemed to be a thing going on with expanding their electorate by appealing to people who don't normally vote. They understood what they needed to do to get over the line. I just think Remain would have been more likely to have won if it had it had done more to mobilise a base that existed largely among Labour voters.

**UKICE:** Can you remember where you were when you heard the result?

**TB:** I do. Sort of where my TV is. I remember sending various drunken, possibly abusive, messages to people as dawn broke over Islington. Steve Hilton may have been a target for some of them. I wanted to catch him before he boarded his luxury flight back to Palo Alto.

**UKICE:** You are only the second person of all these interviews to confess to being drunk that night actually, I have to say. Were you surprised by the outcome?

**TB:** Yes, I thought Remain would scrape home, as I think most people did. I remember speaking to Michael Gove afterwards and he was convinced that Remain was going to win, hence his frightened expression the next morning.

I didn't think Remain necessarily had deserved to win on the basis of its

campaign., but I thought we would edge it. The way we were all wrong suggests we didn't know the country as well as we thought. It certainly seemed a different one the next day.

**UKICE:** And presumably, given your experience with Ed, you weren't particularly surprised by how important immigration proved to be in that campaign?

**TB:** No. I think the immigration issue is important, but I have always been slightly mystified by the way the left kind of – I am trying to think of the right word – goes into a foetal position about it. I felt this when I was working for Ed. He did not go into politics to make lots of speeches about immigration. That is not his thing. He cares about inequality, but he didn't make any speeches about inequality. Indeed he, I think, only made one speech about the environment, which is another thing he really cares about.

When he was Labour leader he made 4 or 5 speeches about immigration. I don't think any of those speeches moved any votes our way. I don't think we won back anyone who was proposing to vote for UKIP because of immigration, or that he persuaded anyone that Labour was tackling immigration in the way that they wanted. But, by making all those speeches, he strengthened the impression that immigration really was the biggest issue facing this country, an almost existential crisis for this country, without really offering any solutions for the country.

The first speech he made about immigration was where he related a conversation with a constituent who told him that there are Romanians being flown in to work in a chicken factory in his constituency. There were terrible living conditions and all the local workers had been undercut and had been forced out their jobs, and it was a terrible thing. I asked the speech writer to check it and for one reason or another all they did is phone the constituent, and the constituent confirmed that he had told that story to Ed Miliband.

When the speech came out, ITV News got very excited by it and they sent a reporter up to Doncaster to find the chicken factory. I asked the person who was meant to check this, 'Where is the chicken factory?'. They went back and they said, 'We're not really sure'. Turned out it wasn't in Ed's constituency, it was 50 miles away in Selby. There weren't any Romanian workers, there

weren't terrible living conditions and in fact, actually, it wasn't a chicken factory- it was a food processing plant. I'm pretty sure there weren't even any chickens involved.

It felt to me symbolic of the whole way immigration was addressed, in that you have everybody agreeing, 'That's a terrible, terrible problem and we really, really need to be terribly worried about it', and lots and lots of scare stories fuelled by media, but the substance is always quite hard to put your finger on.

Is it about numbers? Well, numbers are still very high, but immigration doesn't seem to be very salient. Is it about the colour of your skin? Well, that doesn't make sense either because you have got people coming in now from non-European countries. Is it about a proxy for other forms of discontent? Maybe. Is it whipped up by the media? When you see that the opposition to immigration is often in places where there aren't any immigrants, you do sometimes wonder what the force is that is driving this whole thing.

That is not to say there aren't some legitimate concerns in some places. But I think the whole Labour Party went into some sort of nervous breakdown after Gillian Duffy and lost its voice on the whole issue. I don't think it has found it yet.

**UKICE:** The one thing missing from your list was, is it about control? That, actually, it is not about numbers, it is not about people, but it is about having the sovereign decision?

**TB:** Yeah, that is very interesting. I think for some people it is about racism and xenophobia. Some people don't like foreigners, they don't like black people, but that is, probably, a minority.

There is an issue about sovereignty and control and, interestingly, that seems to be quite a recent thing. When Enoch Powell was making his speeches back in the 1960s, he may have been talking about sovereignty and control but his followers weren't.

If you look at the analysis of all the letters written to Enoch Powell, it really was actually about racism. But I think the 'sovereignty and control' thing has grown in the years since and that it is something that maybe we should just



have addressed head on.

## Setting up the People's Vote campaign

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Do you remember how and when you first became involved in the People's Vote campaign itself?

**Tom Baldwin (TB):** Yes. Alastair Campbell suggested I got involved. He was trying to trying to coordinate better the communications across this multiplicity of different Remain groups which had grown up both during the referendum campaign and since. That was also around the time that the People's Vote campaign was being created out of the ashes of Open Britain.

After some talking with him and other people like Henry Porter, Patience Wheatcroft and Edward McMillan-Scott who had raised some money for a Joint Media Unit I then sorted out a deal with James McGrory, the director of Open Britain. Because, from the start, it was important we worked together. We agreed I would come in, not as another Open Britain person but to do the communications for the People's Vote campaign. I was the first person with a People's Vote email and I think, quite quickly it became clear to everyone that this was where the action was. We needed to change all the branding and change all the emails and turn this whole thing into a People's Vote campaign, and take as many people and as many groups with us as possible.

It was like building an aeroplane as you are taking off; there are bits falling off and you are going very, very fast. It wasn't how you would necessarily design a campaign if you were starting from scratch.

**UKICE:** Was there an element of 'The People's Front of Judea' about the early days with all those disparate groups?

**TB:** Yes. There was an attempt to bring them all together under one umbrella with a clear strategy and message. I think we had seven or eight different groups represented as the 'People's Vote' and some of them were significant in terms of what they brought, in terms of data and fundraising and membership and having contact with MPs. Others were shells – Mike Galsworthy had two such groups, Scientists for EU and NHS for Europe, and that was basically just him. No one really knew what he was about.



Not all of these different groups could have equal representation at the table and I probably gravitated quite swiftly to what was clearly the professional, dynamic and focused end of the campaign, which James McGrory and his deputy, Francis Grove-White, ran very well.

**UKICE:** Presumably, initially at least, you saw this as a bit of an outside shot?

**TB:** I saw it as an outside shot all the way through. At no point was I convinced we were going to win. But we went from being a very, very long shot to being a much closer shot. When we started we had the support of 20 something MPs and by the time we finished I think we had over 300.

By most measures it was an astonishingly successful campaign. We organised three of the four biggest marches London's ever seen, and we did change the debate. We changed the dynamic of at least one major political party. But in the end, you test your successes by success, and we lost, so it can only ever be described as 'nearly a successful campaign'.

**UKICE:** When you first started at People's Vote, I think they had already decided on their name, but was there a strategy in place, or was that work in progress?

**TB:** No, not really. I think part of the trouble, and I think it is an interesting reflection on politics now, is that in order to get off the ground you need to heat your base and you need to mobilise a core vote. If we ever had a strategy to victory it was to persuade people that a People's Vote was the democratic solution for this gigantic Brexit mess – whether you are a Remainer, a Leaver or not sure – a vehicle to solve the problem.

But in order to get started we had to get noticed. The first march we had in June 2018 was the first time I think we really pricked the national consciousness. The dilemma was this: in order to get your marches going, in order to get fundraising going online, in order to get emails sent to MPs and letters written to MPs, you have to mobilise this base of Remainders. But in doing so, you are then also becoming part of the polarising problem that you are trying to solve. We were simultaneously helping to create a crisis and then present ourselves as the solution to it. That is not an easy trick to pull off.

For example, at one point in the campaign I found out that we were putting filters on our Facebook ads so that they did not reach anyone who watched Top Gear, played Bingo, liked Piers Morgan or who had not gone to university.

Now, that is a way to engage lots of people and get lots of clicks. It is probably a way to raise money. But it is not a way to win an argument with the people you need to persuade.

**UKICE:** Is it preaching to the converted?

**TB:** Worse, you are getting the converted to come out and really, really piss off the people who aren't converted.

**UKICE:** Broadly then in organisational terms, looking back, what would you say you got right and what would you say you got wrong?

**TB:** In organisational terms, well, we didn't really have an organisational structure. That was probably the biggest problem. It was never a legal entity. For merely legal convenience James and I decided Open Britain should own our data and we did most of our contracts with them. But no one, certainly not me or James, meant that a largely absentee board of Open Britain should have control over the direction of the campaign. Open Britain was just one of several different bodies that we were having to deal with, and a large part of my working week was going to different meetings, all of which thought that they were THE strategy meeting for the whole campaign. It was a difficult and time-consuming balancing act.

It was okay while we were essentially running a parliamentary lobbying campaign using Remain voters to put pressure on MPs to back a People's Vote. We were racking up bigger and bigger numbers there and we were using the marches to do that. But it was not okay if you were trying to get over the finishing line. And it was definitely not going to be okay if we were preparing to fight and win a new referendum campaign. I was actually quite worried that we could actually win the campaign for a People's Vote and then lose the subsequent referendum.

A lot of the problems we had towards the end of the campaign was to do with a tension between what I would regard as professional people within the

campaign and businessmen who only ever dabbled in politics occasionally. We were saying, 'Look, we need to get our act together properly. We need to put this under a proper legal footing. We need to have a strategy committee, we need to have a proper governance board, we need to have proper political leadership. We need to work out who we actually want to have in the room rather than have a cacophony of voices some of which are pretty destructive and unhelpful.'

We needed to make it clear we weren't a new party or a vehicle for a new party, or a vehicle for realigning politics around Remain. We were there to win a campaign for a People's Vote and then win a referendum if we had it. We needed to put this all on a proper footing. That was obvious and essential. But it ran smack into a lot of pride and angst and placeholding from people like Roland Rudd saying, 'Well I have appointed myself Chairman of the People's Vote Campaign' – in the same way that Idi Amin gave himself Victoria Crosses – or, 'My friend from college, Hugo Dixon, is now Deputy Chairman of the People's Vote Campaign', which was news to a lot of us. In the end, they refused point blank to even consider the kind of re-organisation needed to fight and win a campaign.

But we did not have time to waste so we started doing it anyway. We invited Roland to the meetings but he didn't turn up. We took advice from people who had fought and won elections like Alastair Campbell, Peter Mandelson, Michael Heseltine, Tony Blair and even Stephen Dorrell over at the European Movement. We commissioned various reports to work out what our referendum campaign would look like and what opponents would look like. We started doing the polling, the segmentation and the identification of key voters, all the things you need to do if you are going to win. But that was a trigger for a further explosion of anger and jealousy and rage.

**UKICE:** Were these differences between the various groups of institutional interest or of overall strategy or of ego?

**TB:** Both. To the extent that there was a strategic difference, when I joined there were people like Chuka Umunna and Anna Soubry, who had many qualities, but who were quite divisive figures within their own parties and who were quite clearly not going to be enough to build a majority support in the House of Commons. I think, at various points, they regarded the People's Vote

campaign as a vehicle for launching a new party rather than getting a People's Vote. They were shocked and dismayed when we didn't hand over all our data to them when they did launch a party, and we didn't support them in their efforts.

Then I think the other big strategic difference was over the extent to which we wanted to win a People's Vote and then win a referendum, or whether we wanted to use this extraordinary energy that we had built up to realign politics. I was in the former group. I understand why, but The Independent Group (TIG) and the Liberal Democrats, and indeed the SNP in a different way, sometimes saw the instability we were helping to cause in a political system and within Parliament as an opportunity for them.

By 2019, the Liberal Democrats really thought that they really could break through and win 100 seats. James McGrory, who is a Lib Dem himself, and I thought was nonsense. Some of them were more interested in winning 100 seats than stopping Brexit, even though paradoxically the only way they were going to win 100 seats was with a Stop Brexit Campaign.

That sort of strategic tension was very clear by the end, because I think people like Roland Rudd and Hugo Dixon were of the view that we should be part of a re-alignment process. They were very critical of us for not having condemned the Labour Party more for the position it had taken during the European Elections.

There was always an issue about how much the People's Vote Campaign should be a stick with which to beat the Labour Party rather than a neutral instrument for just winning a People's Vote. I was trying to maintain some strategic discipline around the latter but there were constantly people who wanted it to be an anti-Labour thing, an anti-Corbyn thing, a re-alignment thing, a Liberal Democrat thing, a proportional vote thing. I think those were all distractions and the more we did it the more we just confirmed some people in their view that we were a liberal elitist, metropolitan organisation that was playing at politics. I remember Roland Rudd once appearing on the Today programme to talk about Brexit and being introduced as coming "live from Davos". It was absolutely toe-curling. We began to address some of that towards the end with the launch of People's Vote North and promoting working class voices but that was despite, not because of, non-executive board

members like Rudd.

## Influencing the Labour Party

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Would it be fair to say that during 2018 your priorities and organisation was getting the PLP on side?

**Tom Baldwin (TB):** That was the first priority in that it was a very necessary but not sufficient condition.

**UKICE:** Did you find initially you were pushing at an open door with many of them?

**TB:** No, the closed door was shut pretty tight. It was very, very hard work and the media narrative after the 2016 referendum was, 'All these Labour constituencies have voted Leave'. It took quite a lot to persuade them that, yes, Labour constituencies had voted Leave, but not necessarily Labour voters. Even now, you get the line that, 'While Labour members are very, very Remain, Labour voters quite liked the idea of Brexit'. That is not the case.

By 2017, I think 70% of Labour's vote was Remain. If you were trying to represent your members as a democratic party, you needed to back a People's Vote. If you are trying to represent your voters, there are not many issues which 70% of your vote support, so you should have been backing a People's Vote.

Now I know the Caroline Flints of this world will tell you, and they have told you, that this was strategically disastrous for the Labour Party, because in constituencies like hers there were all these Labour voters who back Leave. And it is true that there is a higher proportion of Labour voters in constituencies like hers who back Leave. But it is not true, or at least hardly ever true, that they were a majority.

The MRP that we did – and people argue about the exact numbers on this, but I don't think people argue about the general point – found only one constituency in the country where a majority of Labour voters were backing Leave, and that was actually Ed Miliband's seat in Doncaster North. I think in the build up to 2019, Labour was polling in low 20s in large part because it was

not backing a People's Vote. It was bleeding voters to the Greens, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats.

Labour's vote only recovered somewhat when it backed a more explicitly People's Vote position. Now, did Labour lose those red wall seats because it was 'too Remain'? That is now the assumption that the whole of British politics makes. And it is true that some votes were lost explicitly on the Brexit issue. Some went Tory, some votes were also lost to the Greens and Liberal Democrats because Labour wasn't People's Vote enough. Some votes were also lost to the Tories explicitly on the Jeremy Corbyn issue. But, even more importantly, a lot more votes in those Red Wall seats were lost to no party at all because there is a great big segment of the electorate that is increasingly recoiling from the whole spectacle. That last group, which has been growing in size pretty much ever since 1997, is what Labour should be worrying about most now.

In 2019, there was a further decline in turnout in most of those Red Wall seats even though it was an election where there was, overall, a slight rise in turnout. I don't think it is as simple as saying that Labour lost Red Wall seats because it backed a People's Vote. I think Labour, possibly, backed a People's Vote too late and didn't make the case for a People's Vote strongly enough, or early enough, and didn't build support for it. It certainly didn't have a UK-wide appeal with a message which galvanised people who perhaps weren't that interested in Brexit altogether.

**UKICE:** It is interesting that you are saying that one of the problems for Labour was not supporting a People's Vote early enough. Did you ever see that piece by Stephen Bush, where he argues that the TiGs had a real political impact in the sense that they made Remain voters more hostile towards Labour?

**TB:** I certainly think that period of 2018 had impact in that a lot of people, not just TiGs, were saying to the Labour Party, 'You need to listen to all these young people that voted Labour in 2017. You need to listen to your members. You need to listen to your voters in seats like Canterbury and places like that'.

I think that was very difficult for Jeremy Corbyn and difficult for the Labour leadership. There was huge resistance from the Labour leadership to us, because we were seen as some sort of New Labour plot or new party plot. I



think there was that element there. It certainly wasn't an element which I wanted to encourage or have any part in, and I remember having some terrible meeting with Karie Murphy in the Leader's Office where she is sort of jabbing her finger into my chest and saying, 'Who the fuck are you and what are you doing?'.

When we didn't back the TIGs and we didn't take those opportunities to back early votes in the House of Commons on having a People's Vote, which were merely designed to embarrass Corbyn, we made a lot of headway with the Labour leadership – and people like John McDonnell in particular- in persuading them that we really were what we said we were. We were a campaign for a People's Vote and not anything else. But it took a big effort.

**UKICE:** How much support was there in the People's Vote movement for the TIGs? Was there significant pressure to back the TIGs? Did Chuka and co consult or inform you beforehand?

**TB:** I don't think they were really talking to me by that stage because they knew where I stood on these things. They may have spoken to other people. I did not like the assumption they made, that the campaign we had all built up together was there for them and it was their campaign. I thought they had many strengths, but I didn't actually want them to be seen as the leadership of the campaign, because I don't think we would get beyond 100 MPs if we did that.

**UKICE:** Who was the leadership of the campaign?

**TB:** That was part of the problem. What we needed was strong and visible political leadership that would help us win the case for a People's Vote rather than repel potential supporters. Eventually we established a political committee which was jointly chaired by Margaret Beckett and Dominic Grieve. We wanted to give that a bigger identity and a bigger profile, but that was obviously upsetting to people like Chuka Umunna and Anna Soubry. But we felt it was necessary if we were going to appeal to more Labour MPs and more Conservative MPs, which is what we needed to do.

**UKICE:** There was a lot of concern around the Labour leadership of a large scale breakaway within the Parliamentary Labour Party. Was that ever a

serious possibility, do you think?

**TB:** Possibly, I don't really know. There was talk about Tom Watson having 50 or 60 MPs who would form a different parliamentary organisation. I certainly think that when the Labour Party began to move, it moved just in time to prevent any of that happening.

**UKICE:** One of the things you did quite a lot during the campaign was release opinion polling that showed support for a People's Vote. What was the thinking behind this and do you think it was a successful campaigning strategy?

**TB:** It was the consequence of a donation from Julian Dunkerton which was (a) very generous and (b) on the strict condition that the money was spent only on opinion polls, and indeed he wanted to be consulted on each poll. We couldn't spend it on anything else

So the extent to which we had so many opinion polls was partly a function of the fact that we were obliged to spend the money on opinion polls. It was certainly successful in moving opinion within the Labour Party. The polls that we were able to do showing a majority of Labour supporters for a referendum in people's individual constituencies was very influential. The polls we did of Labour Party members were very influential.

These were not, as some people said, push polls. They were polls done by YouGov and they wouldn't have allowed us to do anything other than proper, scientifically done, polls. But one of the conundrums for a campaign like ours was that, by the time we finished, support for the People's Vote Campaign was a narrow minority or a narrow majority – around 50%.

But 73% of people thought Brexit was going badly. We weren't able to translate the dismay and discomfort people were feeling about Brexit in support for the People's Vote campaign, because it was such a polarising campaign.

As I said earlier, we had to be part of the polarising process but in the end we were hoisted by that petard.

**UKICE:** You talked specifically about the first mass rally, but overall do you think those rallies were a success for the campaign, or did they boost that polarisation that was ultimately quite unhelpful?

**TB:** They were incredibly successful in generating energy, publicity, excitement, money for the People's Vote campaign and a lot of the credit should go to the team that organised them which was led by Rachel Kinnock. They were brilliant at getting people to write to MPs, getting endorsements from celebrities, giving focus to the team. A lot of the effort of the campaign was handing out postcards to send to your MP that day, or making sure that people committed to various actions. In terms of putting pressure on MPs, they were great.

Our strategy was that our best chance of winning was with that Parliament and with that group of MPs. But in terms of making the case for a People's Vote campaign in the country, or indeed creating the conditions by which we would win a majority if there was a new referendum, I think it may have had its downsides as well. You know, the caricature of it being the longest Waitrose queue in history or whatever. The extent to which it looked like pretty white, metropolitan, liberal group of people on the march helped reinforce polarities which were not particularly helpful.

## Brexit in Parliament, Oct 2018 - Nov 2019

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** By the time Theresa May's deal was done, did you feel that you had made pretty good progress? With this specific argument about the second referendum being anti-democratic, do you think you made progress in combatting that idea?

**Tom Baldwin (TB):** Yes, and some of the polling we did suggested we did actually make some headway on that. We were trying to present the People's Vote as a democratic solution to a crisis, a way out of this mess. I think it was a bit like whack-a-mole. If you look at a lot of the Brexit Party stuff, the Tory Party stuff, in the months before it was, 'People's Vote is undemocratic', but I think we managed to side-line that argument a bit. Some of the precise message testing we did and polling we did confirmed that.

If you are opening up a wider question about whether we should have been

less hostile to Theresa May's deal, my answer has two parts to it. The first is my job was not to try and find the least damaging form of Brexit. My job, very specifically, was to win the campaign for a People's Vote. I thought the more focus and discipline we had around that, the less we were likely to get distracted by new parties or anything else, so I was keen just to maintain that strategic discipline.

But the second part of my answer, and also my honest view, is also that a soft Brexit of the sort proposed by Theresa May's deal, or by the Norway Group or anything like that, was inherently unstable and possibly unsustainable. In the end, I think soft Brexit was the least popular of all the options in the country. People just didn't want it. They either wanted proper Brexit or they wanted no Brexit.

So, I think it would have collapsed in quite precarious circumstances into either a hard Brexit or no Brexit. We were offering a fair and democratic way out which was to say, 'Now that we know what Brexit means, let's put some real options about the future to a vote – let's put it to the people'.

**UKICE:** When you say, 'It would have collapsed under pressure because people wanted a hard Brexit', do you mean British voters, or do you mean Parliamentarians wouldn't have allowed it?

**TB:** The precise mechanism could have been either. It could have collapsed in Parliament, because I couldn't see the European Research Group (ERG) lying down for it and I don't think a lot of the more Remain Labour MPs would have laid down either. I think more likely it would have collapsed at the ballot box in a general election.

**UKICE:** Isn't there a self-fulfilling prophecy about this, in the sense that it was the People's Vote that helped polarise opinion, certainly parliamentary opinion, if you look at what happened over the indicative votes?

One of the reasons there wasn't that backing for a soft Brexit is because people were pushed not to back the soft Brexit options.

**TB:** It was not entirely clear. There are a lot of People's Vote MPs who voted for some of the soft Brexit options. Others took the decision they couldn't vote

for any of them. There is a lot of talk about how far we were coordinating and whipping that and that was an operation done by people Steve Doughty and Alison McGovern in Parliament, which they were really quite keen for us not to be particularly involved in.

But if you look at the voting lists you will see dozens, if not hundreds, of People's Vote-supporting MPs who backed a customs union, who backed the Norway Deal, just not enough to get it over the line. But that is the micro answer. The macro answer to your point is, if Cameron had said in 2016, 'Right, it is a very narrow result, 52/48, and now what we have got to do is bring the country together. I think the best thing that I can do as a responsible Prime Minister is to work now to negotiate a Brexit deal which unites a country', maybe we could have had that.

But that is not what Cameron did. Cameron walked off the pitch, Theresa May started playing the games with her party – similar games to those that Cameron had played – saying 'Brexit means Brexit' or whatever – the ERG was mobilising and a lot of those polarities already existed. What we did, as I have frankly admitted, is we upped the ante on the Remain side and we were part of that polarisation process. Not necessarily to our ultimate benefit, as I have said. But I don't think it is fair to say we invented the polarisation.

**UKICE:** How do you think Parliamentarians handled their support for a second referendum? Thinking back, Andrew Adonis and Dick Newby moved to demand a referendum very, very early on in the process. Do you think Parliamentarians were insufficiently coordinated and they didn't particularly help, or did it not matter ultimately?

**TB:** They weren't particularly well-coordinated. Later on, there were some noble efforts done by people like Alison McGovern and Steve Doughty on Labour's side and Dominic Grieve and Guto Bebb on the Tory side to try and make it more coordinated. But to burst out the traps immediately after 2016 and say, 'We need a new referendum', wasn't, actually, the right response, and it is not even something I would have supported at the time.

The best case for a People's Vote was to say, 'Look at what has happened since. The deal that Theresa May is proposing is something that nobody really wants. It is not going to please anybody. It is all a mess and given that we now

know the reality of what Brexit is rather than just an abstract idea in 2016, maybe we should put it back to people and have a vote'. That is a much more reasonable case than, 'I want a re-run'.

The People's Vote at its best was a reaction to the mess that Brexit had become, and at its worst, an expression of a sort of Remain ideology.

**UKICE:** Was there a click moment where you thought, 'This is where we need a People's Vote?'.

**TB:** I think when we really began to surge was when it became clear there wasn't a parliamentary majority for Theresa May's deal. Because then I think you really could make the case that this was a solution to an unprecedented political crisis.

**UKICE:** Did the idea of a referendum start to gain any traction within the Cabinet at the start of 2019, as we saw the May deal get soundly rejected?

**TB:** Yes.

**UKICE:** Was there a moment when you thought you might get a critical mass of pro-Remain Conservative support?

**TB:** Yes, I think there were two or three moments like that. I think Jo Johnson's on-off support was one. Later, we began to get indications that people like David Gauke were onboard. We were having conversations with Phil Hammond as well, either directly or through his people.

In the history of these things we forget just how close we came in the back end of 2019, when Parliament came together and said to (Boris) Johnson, 'You can't have an election'. That was extraordinary. The Government was not able to get a General Election, they were completely stuck.

At that stage, maybe it would have been possible to get a majority of MPs from all sides uniting around an interim government which would have one purpose, which would be to pass the legislation needed for a referendum, and to hold that referendum. That Parliament would dissolve after the referendum campaign, then there would be another General Election. It was just about



possible even at that stage.

And with the prospect of no deal, we were being given indications of support from a huge range of Conservative MPs who were not supporting People's Vote before. People like Alan Duncan would have come out for us. Yes, it was all a bit of a long shot but we had always been a long shot.

**UKICE:** Presumably your point about Parliament and rejecting the General Election speaks to your earlier point about some parties putting party political advantage over the People's Vote cause?

**TB:** Yes, and it should not shock anyone that is what parties do. The People's Vote campaign existed to get a People's Vote, political parties exist to win elections. Both the SNP and the Lib Dems went for an election in the end. I had a particular problem with the behaviour of the Liberal Democrats who were setting themselves up as 'Remainer than Thou'. When Labour began to back a People's vote, the Lib Dems announced a switch to 'Revoke'. I guess if Labour had gone for Revoke, the Lib Dems would have started a campaign to join the Euro or something. The paradox is that the Liberal Democrats wanted to be the Remain party, but they ended up backing a General Election because they wanted to cash in on a divided Remain vote that was the very thing likely to deliver Boris Johnson a big majority and ensure Brexit went ahead. It was a fundamentally dishonest position.

**UKICE:** How different would things have been with any Labour leader apart from Jeremy Corbyn?

**TB:** I think the biggest difference is Labour wouldn't have been so comprehensively beaten in 2019. In the view of some, Labour lost 2019 because it was too Remain. But, in the view of most people who have looked at the data, Labour lost in 2019 because it was led by Jeremy Corbyn. He did manage to unite a sort of Remain vote in 2017, even though his position was pro-Brexit. But I think there was a calculation for a lot of voters that voting Labour was the best way to stop a hard Brexit in 2017.

That, plus some genuine energy among people who haven't always voted, led to a rather successful Labour campaign in 2017 which resulted in a hung Parliament.

That was not sustainable for the next Parliament when he became deeply unpopular with key segments of the electorate. His hesitation in backing a People's Vote, and his outright opposition towards the People's Vote for a long time was part of it – but by no means the whole thing. His behaviour meant that the Liberal Democrats sat up in their coffin and any small advances Labour had made in Scotland in 2017 were reversed.

Contrast the hesitation and, actually, triangulation by which he pursued this issue, with the way Nicola Sturgeon handled it in Scotland.

In Scotland in 2017, the SNP lost a lot of votes and they lost a lot of their 'Yes to independence, no to Europe' vote. They made a big, hard, tough strategic call on who they were. By 2019 they weren't getting those votes back, or at least not all of them. But what they had got is a much higher proportion of the Remain pro-Union vote.

That is proper politics. That is making big strategic calls about who you want to be as a party and what direction you want to take your country in. I don't think Corbyn made those big strategic calls. For a politician who has made his whole career on principles and so on, he was ducking and diving rather than making the big calls about who Labour was and what its attitude to Brexit should be.

**UKICE:** Did you have formalised mechanisms in place to try and coordinate Parliamentarians? Was there anything that structured?

**TB:** There was. It was rather closely guarded by the likes of Steve Doughty and people like that. In terms of the whipping of a People's Vote group of MPs, we weren't particularly involved in it and we were told to back off. But we did have political secretaries for both Labour and the Conservative Party – they were two of the rather brilliant young people who worked for the People's Vote Campaign. We also had this Parliamentary committee which was meant to be liaising with the campaign, which certainly during the second half of 2019 was meeting on a weekly basis in the House of Commons, and that helped a bit.

**UKICE:** How far, if at all, did your thinking about the practicalities of a referendum get? We had those small debates about what the questions would be, what the structure would look like. Did you spend much time thinking that through, or were you focussed on the first step?

**TB:** We were focussed on the first step but, as I said earlier, it was actually our desire to start thinking about a referendum campaign which was the cause of our demise. We were saying that the structure of the campaign and the governance system was not adequate in any way for fighting a referendum campaign. There was no way we would get the designation or deserve to get the designation.

We started taking these steps independently of the Open Britain board, who were resisting it. We just went ahead and did it, and we raised some of our own money to do it, and we started doing the polling and we commissioned these reports written by Henry Stannard, the first of which was called the Marshall Report. It's overall conclusion was that our governance and our structures were not good enough and we need to improve if we are going to have a referendum campaign.

Ironically, that very report was then leaked by Roland Rudd to newspapers to justify his sacking of us on the basis our structures and governance weren't right. It was us saying that to Roland Rudd that caused him to get so upset with us. He thought it was a personal slight on his reputation or something. When he ignores us, we commission a report to prove the point. He then leaks the report, saying that this is why he sacked us. His antics would have been quite funny if they hadn't had such a terrible impact on so many people.

## The People's Vote campaign in retrospect

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**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Looking back and judging the campaign overall, do you think its overall impacts and consequences were positive, or did it contribute to ensuring we ended up with a Boris Johnson Government and a far harder Brexit than we would otherwise have got?

**Tom Baldwin (TB):** There were lots of positive things about the campaign. Irrespective of whether or not they helped us win, the marches were amazing and important. For the first time in British history, we mobilised a large number of people around a positive idea of Europe. It wasn't, as I've said, necessarily strategically brilliant, but it was also awe inspiring. The proportion of people who felt very positively about Europe went from about 10% to about 35%. That was a phenomenon.

I'm also proud of the way we became financially independent of fund-raisers and big donations by raising millions in small sums of money.

I'm proud of the way we involved young people directly, not just as tokens which is how they are often used in politics, but directly in strategy at the top table. People like Amanda Chetwynd-Cowieson, Lara Spirit, Richard Brooks, Will Dry and Barney Dowling were at the heart of it and were reasons why the campaign had so much energy. So, I think there were lots and lots of brilliant things about the campaign which I will always be proud of.

As I have said, we were part of the polarising problem rather than the anti-polarising solution. But that was only partly a function of how we ran the campaign. It was also how politics is set up now: how you raise money; how you get people to do things; how you build marches and how you build support. You go through social media and there is a polarising effect which has been well-documented and written about at vast length.

I don't think that the counterfactual of merely rolling over and letting Theresa May do whatever she wanted would have either produced a better outcome or been more sustainable. I think what you would have had was a collapse quite quickly into a harder Brexit, because of the dynamics of the Conservative Party.

We were a big part of the resistance to the hard Brexification of Britain. I will regret forever that we didn't prevail because a new referendum could – and I emphasise *could* – have been a healing, unifying thing for the country.

Certainly, when we were thinking about how we would conduct a referendum campaign if we got it, it would have been building on the first referendum campaign and saying that, 'Yes, we have heard that the country can't be the same again. Yes, we do have to tackle some of these issues which have left people frustrated and angry'. Maybe that referendum campaign could have been a way for this country to move forward together. Maybe it wouldn't have been. We will never know.

**UKICE:** We talked a little bit about tensions within the People's Vote campaign, particularly towards the end. But when things seemed to be going well at the start of 2019, were things relatively harmonious or did you always

have to manage those sorts of tensions within the organisation?

**TB:** There was always issues of ego and different groups not feeling that they were being given enough prominence.

There are always personality issues in handling people like Roland Rudd and Hugo Dixon, who had appointed themselves to positions of great titular power without really being involved in the running or the success of the campaign in any way. I think Roland Rudd only came to the offices about three or four times during the whole campaign. There was also a problem with some of the grassroots who wanted us to be much more blue flag, yellow stars and making the case for Europe. It was never easy, but it didn't feel like there was an existential problem coming down the line until quite late on.

Only in the last few months did it become obvious that they were going to move against us. James and I both thought they would probably wait until after a General Election. I was surprised by the timing of it more than anything else. They decided to completely disable the campaign the day before a General Election. It was, to put it mildly, a strategically suboptimal decision.

**UKICE:** Do you have any reflections about that October, when the thing started to fall apart, about what happened or how it happened?

**TB:** Rudd had been planning it. They had to wait until our last big march was over but it was pretty clear that Patrick Hennegan, someone who had originally been brought into the campaign against Rudd's wishes, was up to stuff with him. He had virtually stopped coming into the office by then but he was spotted going off to Finsbury [Rudd's London Public Relations firm].

It was all just very sad particularly for the people working with the campaign. We had a lot of people who were involved in politics for the first time in their lives and had been working incredibly long hours on London living wage. Some of them sending money back for their parents. This was a genuinely inspirational group of people and I think they felt incredibly let down and angry about it. The impression that has been left is somehow this was a nest of vipers. But the reality was the staff were incredibly united. With the exception of one or two people stirring trouble which you'll always get in any office, it was a genuinely happy atmosphere and better than any place I've ever

worked. It was the governance that was a bit of a nightmare.

And the final act came ahead of a General Election campaign where the result was never going to be good for us. It was fairly obvious to most people that our best chance of winning was with that Parliament. The way our electoral system worked, with a divided opposition and Boris Johnson uniting the Brexit vote, meant he would probably win a majority. But I think it was disillusioning and devastating for the young people in the campaign who had worked so hard to be denied the chance to play a proper part.

I think we could have had some influence in that campaign. I think we could have run a much better tactical voting operation than the one we saw. But most of all, I just wanted them to have that chance to play their part. Roland Rudd's vanity and ego and appalling judgment took that away from them.

**UKICE:** How much effort did you try and put into stopping the General Election? Was there a coordinated effort, or was it all a bit too late by then?

**TB:** We were off the pitch in those days, but certainly we were making it as clear as we could to the Liberal Democrats and the SNP that we thought this was a disaster for any attempt to get a People's Vote. The Lib Dems were drinking gallons of Kool Aid based on the European elections. When we were having conversations with them about a tactical voting campaign, they were saying they were going to win seats where they were in a distant third place. If we suggested to them that was unlikely, they would turn around and say, 'that is just because you are a Labour Party person'. So, we weren't getting very far with them.

**UKICE:** Where has that energy from the People's Vote campaign gone?

**TB:** A big problem for politics since the last election is that the People's Vote voice has just disappeared. There is nothing out there doing what we did. Some of that energy is still there, however, waiting to be tapped. You look at the Labour Party now, which has not got a voice on Brexit. I am not saying it should be saying Rejoin or anything like that because clearly we are out of Europe and we are going to remain out of Europe for a long time and maybe forever. But there is a vast amount of energy around the idea of an open, inclusive, future-oriented United Kingdom – it is about what kind of country you



want to be – and at the moment that energy is just running into the ground.

Fetishizing one quite narrow group of voters and diverting all your efforts to winning back that one narrow section of the electorate is not, in my view, the way to succeed. There is a vast opportunity cost incurred if you fail to mobilise and galvanise a growing demographic majority for a different kind of country to the one we're being offered. Demography is not destiny, of course, but the Labour Party should be doing a lot more than it is to tap into that energy with a message and a strategy that speaks to the whole country rather than just a slice of Red Wall voters.