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The Conservative Party and the EU referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You were elected in 2010. Had you always seen yourself as a pro-European in the Conservative Party? Did that cause any problems in getting selected for a seat?

Phillip Lee (PL): I've never seen myself as being particularly Europhile. I think I've always recognised the value of being part of the EU, but could also quite comfortably make a critique of Brussels, its bureaucracy and everything else.

Guto Bebb and I participated in the Business for Sterling campaign. We always chuckled to ourselves that our political careers were basically sacrificed for membership of the European Union because neither of us was particularly Europhile.

It is also true that you could not get selected by saying you were a Europhile. The actual root of Brexit in a political sense, in terms of how the mechanism worked and how it came about, is Tony Blair winning so big in 1997. That hollowed out the wider Conservative Party of all of the sensible people. It left a core membership who were just basically English nationalists. People who looked back at our country's history and misinterpreted it. The problem was the way that the Conservative Party works: local associations select

candidates in their own likeness. The selection for 1997 was really the last year that you could get anybody approaching that “One Nation”-ish, Heathite, however you want to describe it, type of person being selected. For example, Dominic Grieve was selected in 1997. I was on the [local Conservative Party] executive that selected Dominic in Beaconsfield. He was selected comfortably in front of Martin Howe, nephew of Sir Geoffrey (Howe), an avid headbanging Brexiteer QC. Four years later, Martin Howe would have won at a canter in Beaconsfield Conservatives. All the decent people, often the nice people, had left. This was replicated across the country. At each stage – in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015 – the membership got more and more rabidly Brexit supporting. Mark Francois, a classic example, was selected in 2001. He would not have been selected, I don’t think, prior to that. There are numerous people who fit into that category.

What that did, particularly in 2010, when my generation came in, is bring quite a large number of Brexiteers into the party. It was that body of about 80 or so colleagues who persuaded David Cameron to have a referendum. We’re now where we are as a consequence of that.

When I was going through the whole selection process, I never lied. That’s why it took me seven years to get selected. I was always honest and straightforward about what I thought, often to my detriment. There were a couple of seats I probably would have won selection in, but for honest answers on the NHS or whatever. In Bracknell, as I recall, Europe didn’t come up as an issue. It did elsewhere I was interviewed. It was a huge issue in Essex. It wasn’t so much in Bracknell so, in a way, I ended up in the right seat for me because I didn’t compromise to be selected.

Subsequently in Bracknell Conservatives, it all went a bit pear-shaped. The rot started before the referendum. It was essentially a slow infiltration of the local association, somewhat accelerated at the end. We had this fascist core locally. The BNP ran their number four in Bracknell in 2010 and got over 1,000 votes. There was a local dynamic, and essentially those people over time worked out if they infiltrated Conservative associations in Bracknell and elsewhere, they’d get their way. That’s exactly what’s happened. Of note in Bracknell is the local council leader, who’s an interesting character, a passionate Tory Remainer. He had been stopping Britain First from having their annual AGM in our constituency year on year. Over a number of years prior to the referendum,

it was reported that I was deselected. That never happened, but people believed that it did. What can you do in this world where people can choose to believe something and it seems that's it?

UKICE: Did you think the tipping point had been reached by 2013 and Cameron's Bloomberg speech?

PL: Yes. I have a vivid memory of bumping into Rory Stewart on the stairs up from the Strangers' Bar. The Bloomberg speech had gone live that lunchtime, I think.

Rory (Stewart) came second to me in the Bracknell selection, so I met Rory in Bracknell for the first time. He has also known my wife for longer. He said, 'What do you think?' I said, 'I think it's a mistake.' He was visibly worried about having this referendum. I said, 'I just hope it doesn't happen.'

On the night of the 2015 general election I was quite melancholy. I thought the Conservative Party needed to lose, for lots of reasons. Not just the risk of Brexit, but the party itself was morphing into something that just wasn't attractive, certainly not to me.

I remember my acceptance speech, and I couldn't have been flatter, even though I'd just got the largest majority in the history of the seat. It was because I'd already worked out the implications of winning with a narrow majority at Westminster. I was worried that the referendum would lead to Brexit. As was Rory in 2013. We both thought, 'This isn't judging the public mood very well, this could go wrong'.

I also judged it on my medical practice in Slough. Slough voted for Brexit, even though it is extremely diverse and had more European HQs than Scotland and Northern Ireland put together. The thing was, I thought Slough would vote Brexit, and if Slough is going to vote Brexit, then we've got a problem.

There was this sort of arrogance about the Cameron team, because they thought that, as they had won the Scottish referendum, they were going to win everything. I was gobsmacked when they accelerated the process in the shadow of the immigration crisis, the Syrian war. I just thought, 'This is nuts'.

I didn't declare my position on Brexit very early, I waited because I wanted to make my mind up carefully, educate myself and encourage others to do the same. In a referendum, my vote is not worth more or less than anyone else's. My Twitter feed was hosting counter arguments for about three months. I sort of knew where I'd end up. The odd thing was, when I said to my wife, 'I'm going to do this' and I actually booked the Frontline Club in Paddington to do a speech (surprisingly well attended!), I knew I was basically screwing my political career.

Even if Brexit hadn't happened, I was putting myself on the wrong side of the Party membership by coming out against it.

UKICE: Do you think David Cameron and George Osborne understood where the 'party in the country' was?

PL: Not as well as I think they thought they did. Cameron stirred up English nationalism to win the 2015 election with the, 'We don't want these Scottish Nationalists anywhere near power' nonsense. Then that English nationalism was just channelled into Brexit. There are plenty of books to be written about this. They didn't realise the power of what they had unleashed.

On the doorsteps, the awful thing was we knew it would work. When they brought that out I thought 'how low can we go?' I was on the doorsteps in Bracknell and the socialists were answering the door in 2015 saying, 'I don't normally vote for you Doc, but I don't want the Scots anywhere near power'. This was in Bracknell. I instinctively thought, 'This isn't going to end very well. This is going to break up Britain'.

The only thing that that I thought might affect the outcome was the appalling murder of Jo Cox. I thought that would provoke more of a reaction, particularly amongst women. I thought that more people might take a second and go, 'Hang on a minute, what's happening here?'. The polling did narrow after Jo's dreadful murder, it came down from 55 to 52. It had an impact, but Vote Leave were just further ahead than we thought.

I knew coming out and saying I was Remain was basically going to prevent me from progressing in politics. I knew it was a sacrifice. I know people who are currently in Cabinet who don't believe in it. There were politicians coming out

for Brexit because their associations told them to. Westminster is full of weak individuals.

UKICE: Did you think the Remain campaign could have done anything differently or did you think it was a lost cause from the start?

PL: How long have you got? I didn't participate in the campaign and I reflect upon this all the time. I wouldn't have got a say in anything, but God it was awful. I remember sitting in a tea room after Stuart Rose's less-than-impressive performance on Radio 4's Today programme one morning. It was just a complete car crash. George Osborne was opposite me, because he was popping into the tearoom occasionally to network. You could see where things were going.

I looked up and I said, 'If that's the course, you're going to lose. You know that, don't you?'. He said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'It was dreadful, it was a complete car crash from start to finish. What is the campaign? How are you going to counter?' I said, 'At the moment I don't think you're going to win, I think you're going to lose.' I recall him looking surprised that I thought that.

Again, I was basing it on friends, family, patients, constituents. Just this mood that was afoot, that people were almost going to use it as a protest vote without actually thinking through the implications. That's why I have absolutely no doubt that a significant proportion of people would vote differently now.

And it is why I desperately tried to get to a second referendum. I was utterly convinced that people would either just not vote or they'd think again. I always got the impression that the leading Brexiteers felt quite threatened by our little group. They knew that if we actually did succeed in getting it back to the people, that realistically Brexit would have not gone through. But we failed.

Resigning from the May Government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we go back to the aftermath of the referendum, David Cameron resigned-

Phillip Lee (PL): First mistake.

UKICE: What do you think should have happened?

PL: First of all, it was personally weak. He should have steered the ship into calmer waters. My relationship with him had at times not been great, other times okay. I'd voted against attacking Syria in 2013. Since then, my relationship with him had improved and I seconded the Queen's speech in May 2016, which was supposedly a sign of positive things to come. He was competent, quite likeable but I personally found him short of what I would have hoped for in a Prime Minister. Osborne was always more able, I thought. Also, more devious and whatever. Which is possibly what you need to be, I don't know. So, I wasn't surprised that Cameron walked.

I sort of wish Johnson or Gove had won in the 2016 leadership election. I think it would have been a much more straightforward period. I might still actually be there, perversely. I think if they'd owned the whole thing, we'd have had a different outcome. Neither won because in the Tory Party the right wing always ends up stabbing itself in the back. In fact, the only time they haven't is the Thatcher election in 1975.

I was friendly with Theresa May. I was a member of her association for a few years and she came to my wedding. When she got elected, I knew I was going to be promoted. I have a relationship with Nick Timothy, or rather I did have one, I shouldn't think it's intact anymore. Like me, he was a football fan, an Aston Villa fan. He was on the candidates list with me and we'd always got on. In fact, he came round mid-leadership campaign to ask my advice on policy and things, and told me I was going to be in a job.

UKICE: Did you know what was coming in terms of her approach to Brexit?

PL: No. I thought then her instincts would drive her towards a softer Brexit. Because my relationship with her was reasonably well-established I could text and have conversations with her. I went into quite a difficult department. The Justice Department is quite dysfunctional and it's very challenging, in that it's dealing with dark issues all the time. There's not much lighter stuff to put to the media, it's usually that we're trying to lock up rapists and murderers. A lot of mental illness, basically. Hence, I was somewhat wrapped up in that early on and less engaged with the Brexit process.

Initially, Chris Leslie and his allies tried to go for the whole Norway soft option and about 80 Labour MPs, I think, rebelled at the end of 2016. That was the opportunity to get a 'sensible' Brexit. I was surprised that TM did not go for it. The only chance for a soft Brexit was at that point, when there were 80 Labour MPs who were prepared to walk through the lobbies with the Government to support a customs union or Norway, however you want to describe it. It was rejected by the Government.

The other mistake she made early on was to decide to own the outcome of Brexit. Nick (Timothy) probably made the decision. It was tactically stupid because of the nature of the Brexit vote. It had not been solely blue or red, it had been all over the place, so share Brexit – make it a cross-party effort. The decision, though, was being driven by the Brexiteers and the money within the Conservative Party, and where the money comes from. It was a tactical mistake.

I'd made a personal decision to keep an eye on things. I knew the time would probably come when I would have to act – when taking action could make a difference to the path the country took. But meanwhile, I concentrated on reforming women's justice because it desperately needs reform. I was on good terms with some of the backbench rebels along the way – including some who rebelled and then suddenly became loyal again, people like Tom Tugendhat. So I knew what was going on when they were trying to stop this and stop that. I just concentrated on ministerial stuff.

By Christmas 2017, I think Theresa May had just made another speech, I kept thinking, 'This isn't going to work. They've got this strategy they think they're going to get it through the House, they're not'. At the time, I saw my role, as a member of her Government, to take collective responsibility and work from within to try to get things on a better track. I was loyal to the government at this point.

This wasn't true of others. This again is also a measure of the loyalty, courage and principle of the average Tory MP, but I was the only minister who would take media on the morning after the 2017 general election on College Green. If you listen to my interview with Nick Robinson on the Today programme, I was the only one going out batting for Theresa May. Others were already thinking of how to get rid of her.

After that interview, only one senior minister texted me afterwards to congratulate me. Who do you think that was? The current Prime Minister who was already on manoeuvres.

Then we had the awful Grenfell Tower situation. I was involved ministerially with that because I was the Victims' Minister. In fact, it's the only time I've attended a proper COBR meeting. To say the Prime Minister looked in a bad place would be an understatement, at that point. The details of Grenfell are awful. In that context, too, everyone was circling around her, because that's how predatory it gets.

By the end of the year, I started to have short conversations very quietly with people saying, 'What do we think?' No one was happy but no one was prepared to break cover. No one was prepared to do anything. It was a real Catch-22 situation.

When they announced the customs arrangements for Northern Ireland in April 2018, they did a call out to junior ministers to attend a briefing at Number 10 about the proposals. They did a session for backbench MPs, a session for junior ministers, and so on. I'd changed my diary around because I thought it was important to be there, it was a big issue.

I rock up at Number 10 to one of those nice rooms on the first floor. I walk in and I'm first – I'm never first to anything. There's an empty room, there's a screen with a PowerPoint presentation ready to go. I sit down on a chair and I'm looking out over Horse Guards. In walks Gavin Barwell. He said, 'Morning Phillip, do you want a cup of tea? You're the only one who's turned up'.

I then walk out of the room with Gavin (Barwell). Who's coming up the stairs? Guto Bebb. Guto and I are the only two junior ministers who thought it worthwhile turning up to a pretty important discussion on what the agreed settlement on customs was going to be for the United Kingdom in any future Brexit deal. We were the first two ministers to resign. All the others didn't even bother turning up.

We went to a little room. In came this chap with Gavin. They did this presentation and it was very relaxed over a cup of tea. Guto and I were all over it saying, 'Yes, but really?' I remember asking Gavin, 'Is there, somewhere in

this building, a couple of really bright people squirreling away working out the political strategy of this? I don't see how this works'. He said, 'We've got that covered'.

We walked out, Guto and I, he was at the MOD at the time. We crossed over Whitehall. I said, 'This is a mess'. He said, 'Yes'. I said, 'This is not going to end well'. He said, 'No'. That's all we said. I walked off and went back, and I remember seeing my chief of staff. I just looked at him and I said, 'This is going to end in tears. This whole thing is a mess. They're deluded, it's not going to work'.

I went away over Easter and decided that I had to do something, I had to resign. My view was that somebody had to try to cause a political moment to try to get people to realise that this isn't going to work before it was too late to change course.

One of the things holding me back was that I desperately wanted to get our women's justice strategy out, and the buggers wouldn't publish it. It had been ready since Christmas.

In the end, it was me who first went over the top. No one else would. The only person who knew in advance was Dominic Grieve. We were next-door neighbours, close friends, still are. He said, 'Are you sure?'. I said, 'I can't support this. The whole thing is a mess. The whole thing is going to all go wrong. I have to do something, I can't stand idly by, mute'.

I had this human rights speech booking with Bright Blue, the think tank. I basically had this speech written for me by the civil service and then changed the end quite dramatically and on the final page announced I was resigning.

The first person to text me was the Chief Whip. My relationship with the-then Chief Whip is interesting. He's a passionate Remainer, and participated actively in the campaign. He was the first person to text me after I declared I was supporting Remain, 'Great news, please come and join us' was the text. And here he is chastising me for doing what I'm doing.

Again, the relationships are quite interesting in all this. If it hadn't been for Covid-19 we'd have been having supper post-2019. I think he struggles a lot

with all of this. Which is actually why, at the very end of the May administration, he tried to bump the Cabinet into supporting a second referendum. Did you notice that? It was him.

We knew this was coming. He contacts me and all hell lets loose, they were really unpleasant to me, unpleasant to my family. There was legal action on some things, *The Mail* is a disgrace. They thought there was some masterplan, that there was going to be a drip, drip of others. I knew of people who were uncomfortable but there was no grand plan.

The second person to text me when I walked out as a minister to say well done was Jo Johnson. There were others who communicated with me that day, who remarkably managed to maintain their ministerial office. Indeed, some of them are still MPs.

I knew I wasn't alone, but I was alone in the process. The night that Guto went, I'll never forget this, he came up to me, and I remember him taking an envelope out of his pocket. The final straw for him was that the whip's office had cut a deal with the ERG on a couple of amendments in July, and he said, 'I've had enough'.

Campaigning for a second referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): What was your thinking behind advocating for a referendum immediately upon your resignation?

Phillip Lee (PL): When I resigned as a minister and started to advocate for a second referendum, Anna Soubry was the only other sitting Tory MP in favour of a second referendum. The others – Sarah Wollaston, Heidi Allen, Dominic Grieve – did not support a second referendum then and all became second referendum supporters down the line.

The reason I'd come out for a second referendum at this point, was that I'd worked strategically through all the different avenues of where this was going to go. I had spoken extensively to Labour politicians, to the SNP, to everybody else. I had concluded it was not possible for Theresa May's deal to pass Parliament because of the 'red lines' she had drawn and the fact that she didn't want to split the Tory Party. The ERG would vote against anything

resembling a 'soft' Brexit. So you had to find a solution that could command enough support from Labour to counterbalance the Tory hardliners and I knew that Theresa May was not going to do that. It wasn't going to happen. Another Catch-22.

On the night that I did it, Boris Johnson comes up to me in the lobby and he said, 'You're a Remainer, aren't you?' I said, 'No, we're going to end up in the worst of both worlds. That's where we're going to end up, and nobody is going to be happy. That's why I've done it'. Two weeks later, he said in his resignation letter, 'We're going to get the worst of both worlds...'

I was just trying to say: in view of the fact that this political strategy being devised by God knows who in Number 10 isn't going to work, what is a deliverable strategy that actually gets the country into a better position? You couldn't just revoke. That would not have been a good solution. It would have been completely undemocratic. That is why the Lib Dem decision to have a policy of revoke, something I was openly critical of at the time, was stupid. You had to have a sensible, democratic process.

They didn't have democratic legitimacy for any form of Brexit they were going to get either, because that wasn't defined before the referendum. I used to say this to Steve Baker. I said, 'Steve, unless you get a democratic mandate for the actual Brexit deal you get, you're going to die on the stake'. I still hold to that, by the way. The realities of Brexit were never going to match the promises that had been made. Therefore, get a mandate. Back a second referendum, win it and you're politically safer, and in a much better position. He listened to the argument, I might add. He took the meeting.

I was talking to Mark Francois as well, saying exactly the same things at the time. Saying, 'You're not going to get the Brexit you want'. I just didn't think anybody would be as stupid as they were subsequently. I said, 'If you're not going to get the Brexit you want, isn't it better to put it to the people and get the people's support for it? Isn't that better all around?'

That is why my argument was about getting people's 'informed consent' to a known Brexit deal in a second referendum. I deployed this from medicine, which got picked up by others. You can't have a surgical operation in Britain by making one decision. You have to decide to have it, then you meet the

surgeon and the anaesthetists, and they evaluate all the risks and benefits, and then you have to sign on the dotted line. It's a two-stage process to have an operation. But it is a one stage process to ruin our geopolitical and economic positions for generations. Honestly, you couldn't make it up. I knew I had quite a compelling argument.

Then Guto joined, which helped because Guto is an exceptional parliamentary operator. He never really wanted to be in the public eye very much. Dominic (Grieve) did the parliamentary process. Guto, with some assistance from me, did the parliamentary operation of networking and finding out where people were.

I set up the Right to Vote campaign to give us a vehicle to persuade Conservative voters, members and MPs of the merits of getting the public's informed consent in a second referendum. In Parliament, we needed to get 25 Tory MPs to support us and we got 16 in the end. Our strategy was very local – we were painstakingly building a movement from the ground up. We thought we had a chance of persuading people in 66 Tory-held constituencies and wanted to give colleagues political cover locally when they could see the strength of feeling in their constituencies. Change UK – at the time they did it – basically took the wind out of our sails. I desperately tried to persuade them not to do it then. It took a lot of money away from us as well, just as we were getting some momentum. We probably needed another six months. It needed 18 months and we only had about seven.

It's rather like the argument for electoral reform. Of course, we need electoral reform in Britain. But you have to win on the current system in order to get to do the reforming. That's the reality. You're going to see this at these next two by-elections, by the way. The Tory Party will get less than 50% and win both.

It's the same when it came to trying to get a second referendum. It was all very well wanting to have a new party and all these exciting things. Actually, the reality was we needed to persuade 25 Tory MPs to go with their constituents but against their associations. That's where the decision was going to be made.

The Labour Party, we knew where they were within one or two votes already. We knew where the SNP were. We knew where the Lib Dems, the Greens

were, we knew what the numbers were. We spent one year working on the DUP and they were with us at the end. They hadn't publicly declared, but they knew they were being screwed by (Boris) Johnson. There were networks, which I was not part of.

I was aware of what was going on. Which is why Jo Swinson's decision to go for a snap election was ludicrous, irresponsible, the worst political decision probably of a generation. I said all of this at the time. We knew we were just nine short of a Parliamentary majority for a second referendum, nine people. We had 16 Tories and we were nine short.

We got much closer than anyone realised. The other options had basically gone. If you speak to any Labour MP, a member of the 80 who went out on a limb to rebel in 2016 in the way they did against Corbyn. The moment to go for soft Brexit was then, it had been lost.

When the general election in 2017 happened the situation in Parliament became very, very narrowly balanced, and the power moved to the hard Brexiteers and the people who wanted Theresa May's process to fail. She only needed 32-33 moderate Labour people to support a solution, which they would have done if it had come with the democratic legitimacy of a second referendum, and this would have counterbalanced the hardcore Tory Brexiteers.

But Number 10 misjudged this, so did people like Nick Boles and Rory Stewart. They are rewriting history at the moment, but they got it wrong. They thought they would get Theresa May's deal or some equivalent through. But it was never going to happen. The only options were a hard Brexit, which is effectively where we've ended up, or a second referendum. I remember sitting with a group of Tories, probably about November 2018. I know that Tracey Crouch was there and I know that Victoria Prentis was there. I said, 'Look everybody, you're either a second referendum supporter or you're a hard Brexiteer. Take your pick'.

UKICE: In your second referendum, what's the choice? Is it to get a softer Brexit?

PL: I was always of the opinion that the Brexit that appeared on the ballot

paper was the Brexit you could get on the ballot paper through the parliamentary process. This is where I used to come up against a lot of resistance from the Labour side. My view was, as long as it was legally and practically deliverable, the Government should put the Brexit that Parliament wanted put to the people. My view was the harder the better, because it would be easier to campaign against.

On the Labour side you often found people who said, 'It has to be a soft Brexit, we can't have anything that's really bad on the paper'. I'd say, 'No, you've got to get the thing through the House and you've got to do it with cross-party support'.

The Tory Party was split three ways. There were the Brexiteers; the people who didn't care one way or the other (around 40-50%). Then they had people like us who were saying, 'We think Brexit is a disaster for these reasons'.

I thought the idea that you could hold the Tory party together by having a soft Brexit on the ballot paper was wrong. My own view was, as long as it was legally and practically deliverable, I was agnostic about the details. My view was the harder the better, because you could campaign against it, which is what we couldn't do in 2016. Then the Brexiteers could just campaign with a fantasy. Once they had actually got a deal, they would have to defend it – a much tougher task.

For me, it was just about getting to the referendum. Give them whatever Brexit they want, as long as it's legally and practically deliverable and signed off by the Commission and all that sort of stuff. Then, win it. Not just win it narrowly, win it so you put the issue to bed for a generation.

That was my strategy. The Right to Vote strategy was to secure the referendum, morph into the Tory Remain campaign and then win it, then take over the Tory Party. It was a three-stage process. Those of us at the core of it knew that was the purpose. We thought that was in the better interests of the country that you had a more moderate Conservative Party than the one we've now ended up with.

You have to understand the pressures that everyone was under. I spoke to a typical Tory MP, I won't name them because it's not really fair, but a good

friend and he was 100% supportive privately. His association was full of absolute headbangers. He'd moved his family to the constituency in order to secure the seat. His wife sat him down and said, 'You can't do what you think is right. You made me move here, we have children in schools, you are not losing your seat.' There was a number of people in positions like that.

UKICE: Throughout this time, what did you think of the People's Vote campaign?

PL: One of the reasons we set up Right to Vote was because the People's Vote didn't have the right target. The target wasn't the Labour Party, the target was persuading Conservative MPs. You didn't persuade Conservative MPs by having pictures of Peter Mandelson everywhere. You persuaded them with a different argument. The Right to Vote campaign was set up in order to try to do what the People's Vote should have been doing. It was patriotic, it was the Conservative thing to do to back a second referendum. We had these debates, mainly Guto, Sam and me, with the People's Vote. We were obviously in contact with them, because we were all trying to push towards the same outcome. It was hard because it undeniably became a place where non-Corbynistas were hanging out. Then there was the stuff that later all came into the public domain, the internal battles involving Roland Rudd, etc. It was not great.

The People's Vote was well-intended. Everyone was trying to do the right thing. But it was riven with problems. There was no one person in charge. Some of the big marches were impressive. But, fundamentally, the battle was in Parliament. I think the People's Vote never really got that and didn't realise until late on it was about putting enough people through the lobbies at the right time in order to secure their outcome. I think it cast itself too much as the alternative Labour Party. It was riven with problems from the outset, personnel-wise. And I was never sure about the name.

UKICE: Did it become more difficult to persuade other Conservatives, as you became more of a party within a party? Did your relationships with mainstream Conservative MPs break down?

PL: Sometimes. I remember having a bit of a bust up in Members' Lobby because I was tired one night. Somebody who agreed with us but wasn't

prepared to do anything about it explained, 'I've got a mortgage to pay'. You just look at them thinking, 'How are you a member of Parliament? This is about the future of the country. You know this is wrong. You know it's been bought on a pack of lies. You know this is detrimental to the future of the country, your children's future and everything else. You know this in your marrow and you're giving me grief'.

Then there was the so-called self-styled, self-named rebel alliance which sadly made very little difference to the outcome. Those of us who had been plugging away, doing the hard political graft, were sad that this was all too little, too late. We got the Benn Act, but that was only a small part of what we needed to achieve.

We knew there were four Cabinet ministers who were favourable, who would be supportive, and we got really close with a couple of them. There was one in particular to whom I was close and to whom I said, 'it's now or never'. But it's always the same weak and selfish argument ultimately, 'It's better if I stay onboard the ship and steer it into better waters'. Which is code for, 'I'm not going to sacrifice anything'.

When Theresa won the Parliamentary Party's confidence vote in December 2018, that was when she should have acted. I supported her in the confidence vote but was urging her privately, 'take this mandate and deploy a strategy that has a chance of working'. I would just constantly keep saying to her, 'This isn't going to work'. I'd go and see her or I'd text. Her view was that this was the best Brexit we were going to get. It probably was, but that was beside the point; it wasn't going to work. Sure enough, when she put her deal to the vote subsequently it lost by a very wide margin.

Theresa May had a narrow window to reset her strategy, in early January 2019. She had a further opportunity in April when the 'indicative votes' process showed that the option with the most Parliamentary support was a second referendum. There was never the parliamentary majority needed to get a soft Brexit through without the second referendum as well. This was because of Labour MPs' positions. Supportive senior Labour figures knew that the great majority of Labour MPs at that time wanted a second referendum solution (though some hadn't publicly said this). So we knew that we had to create the circumstances where this was a practical outcome.

I finally got to see Theresa May in April 2019 when she had tried and failed to prove me wrong. I got this call to invite me to Chequers. I didn't tell anyone. I sat for an hour with the Prime Minister over a cup of tea, outlining to her what I thought she should do because if she didn't do it, she'd be toast personally. That she needed to take her deal, which was the only Brexit deal we were ever going to get. But it just wasn't going to pass the House. I said, 'It's not going to work, you're not going to get it through. They have the numbers. That's what's going to happen'. Corbyn and that lot, they want chaos because from chaos comes their revolution. That's the psychology of that lot.

We knew all of this because of a very experienced network of colleagues from most Parties (except the DUP and Sinn Fein) and both Houses, the 'Trains and Buses' group. That cross-party group coordinated all of the parliamentary activity geared to securing a second referendum over the 15 or so months between mid-2018 and the General Election in 2019.

I remember at the end, Theresa said, 'You've really thought about this haven't you Phillip'. I was thinking, 'Yes, funny that. I've sacrificed a ministerial career. I can see my Tory Party going down the toilet and becoming an English nationalist fringe. Yes, I have thought about it!'

It could have been historic. It could have been a bit of cross-party work. They could have outflanked Corbyn. There were people who were still prepared to walk. Our numbers were always more accurate than the Government Whip's office. Every vote Guto came to me with a piece of paper and he said, 'That's the range. I'm unsure about two people'. It was always, always right. He was working with Stephen Doughty.

We sort of knew where people were all the time, pretty much. I also worked on the ministerial resignation stuff. I knew Sam (Gyimah) was going and I knew Jo (Johnson) eventually was going to go. One minister once said to me, 'When do you want me to resign?'. He's still in there. I can't take that seriously. I feel sorry for him. He's now in a party, but he's homeless. He's on a bench, in political terms, at the moment in the park.

So, April 2019, I'm with her at Chequers. She said, 'I am this afternoon meeting with ERG people'. I said, 'Yes, I know'. She said, 'How do you know?'. I said, 'It's all over the media'. She looked at me and I said, 'They

leak like a sieve. They're liars, don't trust them. No one knows I'm here, but I know that Iain Duncan Smith is turning up in his Morgan sports car at 2pm. This is how they are'. I can only say to you that she was very naive or badly advised. I tried. This idea that I didn't try internally, I tried for ages. Even as a minister I was talking to her.

I remember going to see her for a gin and tonic in the middle of the leadership election to replace her. I went to the flat in Downing Street. I sat down and Philip (May) is doing his gin and tonic mixing. She said, 'They told me if I named the date, they'd give me their support'. I looked at her and I said, 'That was never going to happen'. She looked at the floor.

I was friends with her. We'd say hello now. The Party is her family, she has no children. Her level of loyalty is deep. I was on good terms with her. For me, it was extremely difficult with Theresa because I didn't want our relationship to break down over this. I tried to point out, including through mutual friends, that she was surrounded by people who were sticking knives in her back, always, all the time.

Now she's this elder stateswoman on the back benches occasionally popping up saying things that are common sense. Everyone says, 'Isn't it quite something that Theresa is saying this?' That's how far that party has fallen, that she's getting traction saying things that are obvious. I tried, but in the end obviously she was going to get removed. Then we get the Johnson era.

UKICE: Was that when you concluded that the Conservatives under Boris Johnson was no longer the party for you?

PL: I think it was an incremental thing, but yes. I remember Guto and I going to see Rory when he ran for the leadership and saying to Rory, 'What is the point of having a pitch for a soft Brexit outcome? You're going to lose. Why lose defending something that's indefensible?' 'Becoming Norway is not taking back control, is it?'. He wouldn't budge. The politically astute thing for someone like Rory to have done would have been to have accepted publicly that the only way to resolve Brexit in the public interest was to put it to the public in a confirmatory referendum. He could have offered to put a hard Brexit on the ballot paper – for that matter he could have offered what we've ended up with. He was never going to win the leadership because its MPs and

membership were never going to choose someone like him advocating a soft Brexit. It was obvious that his own pitch was a futile exercise in the Tory Party at that time. He never had a chance. So what was the point of running?

In the end, Sam threw his hat in the ring to try and get some traction for us. He obviously knew that we couldn't win either. It was a courageous move to try to get Tories to realise that the choice was between a second referendum, and a hard no deal Brexit. The party kept convincing itself there was a middle way, but there wasn't and there hadn't been one for a long time.

That's the frustrating thing for people like me, Guto, Dominic and co. We knew that it was self-evidently not going to be a soft Brexit because of the dynamics of the place. The combination of Corbyn and 100 or so Tory hard-liners. That combination, the numbers, meant it just was impossible to get to the Oliver Letwin, Nick Boles utopia. It just was never going to happen.

In fact, Oliver (Letwin) was going to vote for a second referendum, as was (Philip) Hammond. They all belatedly, too late in the day, realised what we had realised a year before. It took them until about July 2019, so before the recess, for them to say, 'Yes, we're probably going to end up with a second referendum, aren't we?'

The problem was that, at that point, the momentum had gone. Johnson had got control of the levers of power and they started messing around with prorogation and all those things. The moment was Christmas 2018. If a Cabinet minister had gone in that period immediately after the confidence vote then I think we would have won, but we couldn't get them to do it.

UKICE: In this period, we have got the Benn Act, and we've also got all this talk about the possibility of a temporary government of national unity, possibly to break the parliamentary stalemate, and possibly something with a confirmatory referendum or a second referendum. Did you think that was realistic at that stage?

PL: Initially, when I started, I thought we didn't need to go down that path. I thought I could persuade Theresa of the numbers and we could probably just do it internally, so to speak, without having to. Originally, Anne Milton said, 'It's going to end up in a government of national unity'. I said, 'Is it?'

A government of national unity came up in the Trains and Buses group. We had built good relationships. There was a supper in February, I think, 2019. Certainly, it was in the winter months. Dominic (Grieve) was there, Sam (Gyimah), me, Guto, Sarah Wollaston, Chris Leslie. There was a nervousness about it because everyone is quite party loyal, quite tribal. I remember me and others piping up, it wasn't just me talking by the way. I said, 'If we get to that point, who is better placed than us to bring this about? We're the only cross-party group which is operational, we're it. We need to think about how that's going to work, because we have a responsibility to do so whether we get to that stage or not'. It didn't ever really get talked about in much detail.

When the 'Benn group' was formed to try to get a parliamentary process to stop the Government from forcing their Brexit deal through, I used to sit in Hilary's room, because as select committee chair, he had this grand set of rooms in the tower overlooking the river. You'd look around this room and you had Hilary Benn, Oliver Letwin, Philip Hammond. I was there, Guto was there, Dominic Grieve, Yvette Cooper, David Gauke, all in this room. Caroline (Lucas), Margaret Beckett. All these people in this room. You just thought, this is a Cabinet, this is a credible government.

This a group of competent, able, well-motivated people who represent the broad majority, however you want to describe it, centre right or centre left, of people in Britain. Wouldn't it be great if you could just swap places across the road with the monkeys who are currently in Cabinet? There was a brief moment where it started to become something we would consider.

UKICE: Was there ever any chance Theresa May might have gone for a referendum?

PL: I actually wonder whether she would have won her referendum for her deal. I do wonder whether, with all of the power of Government behind her, if she'd gone to the people, she might have pulled it off. She would then have been in an unassailable position.

UKICE: At that stage, what she was negotiating and failing to get through was a withdrawal agreement, it wasn't a long-term relationship. It was only a starting point for negotiations with the EU. I always wondered how feasible a referendum was on that as opposed to one after having been through the

negotiations.

PL: You could have decided to wait until you actually had something substantial to put to the public, which had been agreed. Once you had stable government, as in a majority that could actually govern the nation, which is what our intention was.

It was said that there were 70 to 80 Labour MPs who were prepared to support her against the Labour whip if she proposed a second referendum. When I told her that at Chequers in April 2018, she said, 'I was never told that'. She wasn't getting the information that was out there. She didn't think it was possible to get it through the House. Her chief whip kept telling her, 'There's no majority for it in the House'. But there was if she showed the leadership.

The thing was, because of that group of Tory MPs who didn't really care about Brexit one way or the other, if Number 10's decision was to go for a second referendum, overnight 100 or 150 Tory MPs would fall into line. They would have done what they were told. Suddenly, you had more than enough of a majority to govern the nation.

I actually think her problem was she was putting party before country. She knew the party membership wanted Brexit, so she was going to deliver it. The party membership is nowhere near reflective of the Tory vote in this country, let alone the public.

David Lidington allegedly commissioned some work on how the second referendum would work internally. I think it was David. They were beginning to war game it, going, 'How could we do this?'. That's why they went in for the kill and got rid of her.

Dominic and my strategy was to go long. The longer this goes on, the more likely we are to secure a referendum and the more likely we are to win it because the British public will want resolution. That was the strategy, which is why Jo (Swinson)'s decision to go for a snap election was daft.

The Liberal Democrats and the 2019 election

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Just before Jo Swinson made the

decision to go for a snap election, having resisted the possibilities of joining the independent group, you do finally, dramatically, cross the floor and join the Liberal Democrats. What finally persuaded you this was the moment to go?

Phillip Lee (PL): Johnson becoming Prime Minister was the final straw. He'd offered me a job in July 2019.

UKICE: On the condition that you were prepared to go for no deal?

PL: Just on the condition that I would support the Government's position on Brexit. My face must have told a story. Why would I do that? Unfortunately, it's because quite a number of colleagues did exactly that. Europhiles who are still serving in Government.

And that's the type of person Johnson is used to dealing with. He's going to think that offering me the minister for paperclips in some department is going to make a difference to my decision, because for most people it does make a difference. That's sadly how most people in that position behave.

I have a relationship with Alistair Carmichael from when I led a delegation to Qatar, as chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group to Qatar. This was when I was backbench MP, probably around about early 2016.

In the evenings on these delegations, you've done all your meetings and zoomed around meeting various people. Your evenings are usually your own. We'd sat in the Four Seasons Hotel in Doha, having a drink, chewing the fat about life. There was a Lib Dem peer, whose name escapes me, who was on the same visit. They remembered what I was saying. I clearly had held forth a bit on the state of politics and direction of travel, and was worried about the upcoming referendum. I'd probably said all of this.

Alistair was the person who reached out to me originally, probably in May or June 2019. We just started communicating and talking. My own personal plan was that I was probably going to go much later in the year. But because of the prorogation nonsense, I thought if they're lying to the Queen, this lot are capable of anything. I brought it forward. The Lib Dems got 24 hours' notice, which explains why their immediate management of my defection wasn't the best.

UKICE: At the time they had gone through the European elections. The Lib Dems were riding high. Did you think it was a bubble that might burst?

PL: I thought they had a real opportunity to break through. It was self-evidently the case, and it remains the case that the seats the Lib Dems need to win are Tory held, so aping Labour is possibly not a good political strategy. It's something to which I think some of the activist base need to wake up. There were parliamentary members who agreed with that analysis.

I thought there was this opportunity to join the party as it actually grew into the space that had been vacated by the Tory Party, those four to five million Tory Remain voters. My view was that I would be joining a party at a time when it's on the move. Its membership is increasing. The people joining that I'm aware of are ex-Tories, members and voters. Why not join something and help to shape it to fit the times? Which is essentially for the Lib Dems to edge into that space, something which is still the case. It's still where they need to go.

I wasn't blinded by the Lib Dems' interpretation of the polling, the, 'I stand here before you to be the next prime minister of Great Britain and we're going to win 200 seats' nonsense. That clearly was a fantasy which I wasn't going to buy into. I did think our internal strategy, as in the group that were trying to go for the second referendum, was that we thought the second referendum would take place in probably September or October 2020. It would be either a national government of unity, or a Tory government limping on until that point.

We thought we had time. I thought I had more time than in the end I ended up having. I joined in September and I'm at the polls in December, which was not the plan, and certainly not my expectation. It was completely irrational; it was an illogical thing to do. The party itself internally was not in a fit state to run a general election. It didn't have the personnel. It only appointed its new chief executive about four weeks before the election. It was so obviously the wrong call and yet Jo Swinson made it, with no apparent consultation. It was a fait accompli when I found out about it from a member of another party.

There was a parliamentary meeting on the Monday after Jo had taken the decision over the weekend. I was most vocal against a general election. So were Vince Cable and Tim Farron. I was the most visibly pissed off, to say the least. I thought it was wrong for the country. We should be concentrating on

one thing, which was getting to a second referendum, because that was the one thing all of us in the room wanted to get to.

I also thought it was wrong for my new party, I thought it was going to end in tears. Sadly, I was right. I think everybody knew that fear of Corbyn was a big issue. God only knows why they made that decision, I have no idea. I think they were blinded by the polls, I guess.

UKICE: What about the decision to revoke? Albeit with lots of caveats about a majority Liberal Democrat government. What about making that the centrepiece of the campaign?

PL: The trouble with that policy was that it was never going to work. Ultimately, your policies have to appeal to enough people to win elections. I never met anyone on the doorstep congratulating me on that policy but I met plenty of people who told me that it was anti-democratic. The intention of it has obvious attraction; it just wasn't politically the right way to go about it.

That policy came from the floor of the Lib Dem conference. I think the caveats probably came from the leadership because they knew it was a stinker. I had many conversations in Wokingham persuading people. Essentially I said, 'it's a stinker and it's never going to happen, so don't worry about it'. Because what could you say? It was stupid. Yes, it was antidemocratic. The irony was there were three Tories who voted for revoke, I think, during the indicative votes. I think Alan Duncan did, bizarrely, in the context of no deal or revoke. I also did at the time and everyone went, 'What are you doing?'. I said, 'Do you really want no deal? If I'm confronted as a parliamentarian and the only choice is between no deal and revoke, I'm going to revoke. I know it's antidemocratic, but sometimes you've got to do what's in the best interests of the country. No deal isn't, is it, so revoke'.

Ironically I had walked the walk in Westminster to support revoke, but as a policy going into an election it was stupid. It was beyond parody it was so bad.

UKICE: You decamped to fight Wokingham rather than refight Bracknell as a Liberal Democrat in the election. What was the thinking about that and how did that campaign go?

PL: The thinking behind it was pragmatic politically. I wasn't going to win as a Liberal Democrat candidate in Bracknell. I wanted to continue in the House of Commons because at that point I thought that Parliament would continue for much longer than it actually did and that there would be a second referendum. Wokingham voted Remain and Bracknell probably voted Brexit. My old constituency had Wokingham Borough parts to it so in reality local people found it acceptable – the border between the two constituencies makes no sense to the local people. I had a profile in Wokingham. I had a news column in Wokingham newspapers as an MP. I had demonstrable political links. To my mind it was a bit of a no brainer, but I waited until I was approached about it. It was not promised to me in any way beforehand.

From a personal point of view, I had gone from a 'safe' seat to one that was at best going to be very marginal. I regretted that I had to sacrifice representing a constituency I genuinely like and where I had developed good relationships. But my judgement was that the Brexit deal my county was going to get was not in the interests of my constituents in Bracknell or the people I hoped to represent in Wokingham and I stand by that. We live in a representative democracy and I think that most people don't understand that. It means that I'm elected to do what I judge to be in our collective best interest, not what they are telling me to do if it's detrimental to their futures.

The subsequent campaign went well, considering the unexpected snap decision to hold it. I still think that I'd have stood a better chance if the election had been held in 2020, particularly if a second referendum had been secured or won. But we will never know.

On the ground it was very, very positive. In all the thousands of conversations, because we campaigned very hard, I don't think I had a single conversation about being some sort of carpet bagger, disloyal to my old consistency. Nothing like that ever came up.

UKICE: Did most people know John Redwood's position on Brexit?

PL: Yes in my experience they did and most of his constituents didn't like the position he took. The problem was, they disliked Corbyn more than they disliked having Redwood as their MP. On the doorsteps, we started off with some good initial canvases and it's all going well. But I started to increasingly

have conversations with people saying, 'Of course I want you to be my local MP. I can't stand him. He doesn't stand for anything good. I don't agree with him most of the time, but I can't have Corbyn. I'm sorry, you haven't got my vote'. It happened over and over again. It was mainly people aged between 35 and 55 saying that, that sort of demographic.

If Keir (Starmer) had been the leader of the Labour Party in that election you'd be looking at the member of parliament for Wokingham. It's as simple as that, it's not complicated. That was despite that silly revoke policy, which probably cost me a few votes. We ended up getting the Tory vote under 50 per cent, which was a remarkable achievement in the circumstances in view of what happened to the Lib Dems nationally.

Bizarrely, the Green Party ran a paper candidate, who didn't even bother turning up to the count, and who got over 1,000 votes. The Labour Party campaigned locally against me and left Redwood alone. People talk about to me about the need for a progressive alliance. If I'd been up against just John Redwood in that constituency, even with Corbyn, I would have won.

There is that, particularly across the south of England, growing majority of people who don't like what we've got, but aren't particularly inclined to vote Labour. They're waiting, essentially, for a (Tony) Blair mark two-type project. Unfortunately, Keir is going to have a real challenge delivering that.

UKICE: Do you think the Liberal Democrats are now the natural home for Conservative pro-Europeans who no longer feel themselves attached to the party?

PL: Not yet as naturally as it should be, though Ed Davey is making good progress. The problem was that the revoke policy put off a lot of Tory Remainers on the doorstep. They didn't like it because it was anti-democratic, it wasn't right. They didn't like Jo Swinson much either.

In politics there's absolutely no point in coming second, no point at all. You're either in it to win it or just don't bother. I think we could have won despite what happened nationally. We would have won Wokingham with either a promise of a second referendum to come or if a second referendum had already taken place and had gone Remain. In the circumstances I was trying to create, I'd

win in Wokingham.

Unfortunately, you don't have control over those circumstances, when you're in the position I was in. I personally think Jo should have spent time talking, particularly to me and Sam, about the pros and cons of going to the country in 2019 and she didn't. Honestly, it was a massive missed opportunity.

Going back to your original question. We should be the home for those Tory Remainers. Indeed, our new Liberal Democrat chairman in Wokingham is an ex-Tory member. Maybe that's because I've attracted people, I don't know.

The problem is that the Lib Dems' political brand was damaged in that election and your average voter wants you to be talking about the issues that matter most to most voters. You've got to try to understand the people you're trying to reach. If you're talking about issues people view as fringe, and whether they should be or not is not my point, then you're in danger of missing a massive opportunity. I think the current Liberal Democrat leader gets it.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Do you think this Remain-Leave split will still be relevant by the time of the next election, assuming this Parliament runs its course?

Phillip Lee (PL): No. I think there was a moment where it mattered. I think the salience of Brexit as an issue that is going to swing people's votes is diminished. What has replaced it, I think, is competence. Are we governed competently? In the minds of the average person in the south East of England, they know they haven't got a particularly competent government. They sort of occasionally laugh about the clown that's in charge, but they instinctively know it should be better than it is. The Brexit deal is evidence of that. The Covid-19 response last year is evidence of that. The PPE corruption, the moral corruption and all this sort of stuff is evidence.

I think you can use Brexit, because look at Northern Ireland, there's evidence of it unravelling. Fishing industry, the same. You don't characterise it as, 'We need to re-join now', because that's a down the line thing. What you can do is frame it about competence and about doing what's right for the country.

UKICE: Do you have any reflections on the last decade in politics, having lived through this exceptional time?

PL: I feel like I was privileged that I was part of this whole process. I was very closely involved throughout. I obviously was the first to do this and the first to do that, sort of thing. I have some regrets that I'm not involved any more. I think it's only reasonable to feel like that. I don't actually have any regrets about the decision I made. Perhaps only that I delayed resigning as a minister longer than I should have done.

If I was to do it again, I probably would have resigned in January 2018 and not June. With the Right to Vote campaign, if I'd resigned earlier, it would have been up and running earlier. Then Change UK sort of took the oxygen away from it, which was a strategic error. That's probably the only strategic thing I would do differently.

We all have internal red lines, I think. Well, I like to think we all do. My red lines were that I couldn't in all honesty with any integrity stay onboard the ship when I thought it was going to end up where it has ended up. I don't have any regrets. I miss not being involved. Although, I should imagine being an MP the last 12 months has been pretty shit with Covid-19, etc.

I'm glad I participated. I did the best I could and undoubtedly made mistakes along the way. I would never have thought this was going to happen. If you would have asked me in 2010, I would have probably said to you, 'All things being well, I'm here for the long term'.

I thought I'd be an MP until about 2040, so a 30-year political career. I thought I had it in me to become a cabinet minister at some point in that process. That's what I thought was going to happen.

It turned out the way it turned out. If I'd have taken the job that was offered to me in July 2019, I probably would now be a minister of state, maybe. But I could not have stayed onboard the ship last year. The doctor in me would have found the decisions around Covid-19, social care and clearing patients out of hospitals into care homes an abomination. It was morally disgraceful. In American terms, it's probably corporate manslaughter.

I sort of knew my face was never going to fit in with the characters who got hold of the Tory Party. They got hold of the Tory Party because of a poorly judged decision both to hold a referendum and to hold it in the shadow of an immigration crisis. That's what the history books are going to say.

My face didn't fit anymore. The party had morphed into something I could no longer support. That's why I made the decisions I did. I just wish the Lib Dems had been a bit more patient in 2019 and the leadership had not made the decisions they did, but these things happen.