Owen Paterson

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In business and in government

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): In 1997 when you first entered Parliament, were you at that point in favour of leaving the European Union?

Owen Paterson (OP): I think we go back earlier than that. I was a tanner for 20 years. I took the business from 15% exports to 95% exports, which meant a huge amount of travelling. I was abroad more than a third of the year, right across the world including Western Europe.

What was extraordinarily interesting, when the Wall came down, was going to Eastern Europe. It turned out many of my German suppliers had quietly been getting stuff manufactured either in the old East Germany or what was Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, helpfully sticking labels on their materials saying in German ‘Made by hand in Germany‘. That was amazingly interesting, going to these countries as they re-emerged.

We opened up whole new markets in Asia, places like Taiwan and, obviously, free countries like United States and Canada were also very important.

Through all that, our trade was very much damaged by the lack of free trade around the world. Countries like Argentina, which banned exports, or countries like Japan which restricted imports by ludicrous tariffs.

I became the UK representative on COTANCE, the European trade association for leather and I then became President. Obviously, I had a lot of dealings with other trade associations across the continent. We made it very much a campaigning organisation for free trade. I remember when we inherited it, it was very much motivated by trying to gain grants and funds from the Commission. I made it much more outwardly facing and international in outlook.

I brought in non-EU countries, for instance Norway and Switzerland – both EFTA countries. We started WTO cases against countries behaving poorly. This would've been, I suppose, early to mid-1980s. It was Argentina, Hungary, Egypt, and Japan for breach of free trade.

I've had quite a lot of experience across Europe and I speak French and German. I got fed up with the dual translation during meetings which delayed decisions, so I always insisted we spoke one language and then I translated for the others, to speed things up. We got quite a lot done. In the course of that I thought that Europe was simply not working, this idea of trying to impose a uniform government effectively from the centre. I was particularly struck by the attempt to rapidly impose it on these newly freed up countries who had just escaped from the Soviet Union's empire.

Funnily enough, that's where I first met Boris Johnson. The old Prague airport had horrible lino Formica surfaces at the very narrow points in immigration, so you were sort of constrained how you moved. There was this individual with a lot of blond hair who was badgering slightly bewildered businessmen and asking them about European regulation. That's how we first met. I was going back to the UK, and he was going to Frankfurt. We've been in touch ever since.

What we were seeing was this attempt to impose regulations on countries which had recently been freed up from communist rule. It seemed to me to be disastrous. Before I got into Parliament, I'd got probably more experience than many MPs of travelling very widely on business. I'd go to somewhere like

France for a month and just drive around finding new customers, and all over Germany and opening up the whole German sphere across Eastern Europe. I had a very clear view that this European uniformity wasn't going to work, and much better would be to have an arrangement of independent sovereign states.

I inherited my seat from John Biffen, who was one of my main sponsors and who had actually voted against Britain's entry. My other close sponsor was Nicholas Ridley, who was my wife's uncle, and he had extremely clear views on the demerits of a political arrangement where elected representatives don't make our laws, where you can't get rid of them by voting.

A rather long answer to your first question, but I had a very clear view in 1997 it was a bad thing to have more integration.

UKICE: And you weren't thinking, after spending a month in France, driving around Germany drumming up business, that something like free movement was incredibly useful eliminating the need for separate visas for each country.

OP: It's all irrelevant. It's complete nonsense. There was this concept of an idiotic person who started off with £100 in cash, British pounds, would get off the boat at Hook of Holland and change them all into guilders. He would then drive for half an hour to Venlo and change the dwindling pile of guilders into deutschemarks, and then he drove around and into Belgium and changed them for Belgian francs and then went into France. This was a ludicrous idea, it didn't happen like that.

I did trade in Taiwan and the United States, and movement was not a problem. We did trade shows all over the world, shipping samples around. These were just trivial things. Business is like water, it finds its way through.

What was disastrous was the impositions of standards that had a very bad effect as I recall, on European factories, and I saw factories being closed down as a result. A lot of manufacturing left Europe. So absolutely not.

UKICE: In 2005 you decided to back Liam Fox for the leadership. Was that partly because of the Europe issue?

OP: Yes, Liam had quite robust views. Don't forget, by then things had got really serious. We had the horrors of the Blair Government, a whole succession of treaties. Maastricht was obviously bad. I came into Parliament when the Tory Party was still very bitterly divided and had a pretty dotty policy on the euro, which was, 'Not in this Parliament'. It was a very unsatisfactory policy. It was Iain Duncan Smith who said never to the euro, which at the time seemed to be a major radical move.

The Government swallowed this huge increase in integration with Nice and Amsterdam and Lisbon and all this other stuff, and the cheating on the constitution, which came around the corner under another disguise.

I've always backed people who wanted to restore our national sovereignty. I'm quite clear about that.

UKICE: How convinced were you by David Cameron's Eurosceptic credentials back then?

OP: Not at all. He didn't have any. He tried to get a very modest change on some social security arrangements and the Europeans were too pig-headed to give him the least concession, and sent him back with virtually nothing.

UKICE: What did you make of the Bloomberg speech when you heard it?

OP: I honestly can't remember.

UKICE: That's an answer in itself, I suppose. You were, of course, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Did it cross your mind, at that point, that leaving the European Union might have any implications for Northern Ireland, particularly when it came to the border?

OP: Yes. I was the Shadow Secretary as well, which is relevant. I spent five years going to Northern Ireland every week, three years as the Shadow and two years as the real thing. I did get to know Northern Ireland very well.

I spent a lot of time with business in Northern Ireland. My strategic aim was to cement the political settlement which was begun by John Major taking incredibly difficult decisions which were then followed through by Tony Blair in

the Belfast Agreement. I wanted to match it with an economic settlement in order to cement it for the future.

My aim was to turn the whole of Northern Ireland into an Enterprise Zone.

When I was there 77.9%, I think, of GDP was state spending, which made Gorbachev look like a rabid capitalist. I think the Soviet Union, when it collapsed, about 58% was state spending. This was, obviously, completely unsustainable.

There are some brilliant businesses in Northern Ireland, which I got to know. My intention was to give the Northern Ireland Assembly the right to set their own corporation tax, which followed the Azores Judgement, where the Portuguese had tried to give a similar arrangement to the Azores, and a ruling came down from the EU, of which I strongly approved. They couldn't arbitrarily carve out a beneficial tax regime for a specific geopolitical region of a jurisdiction unless the foregone tax was absorbed locally.

I was all in favour of reducing corporation tax, ideally, below the Republic of Ireland level. Reducing corporation tax down to 12.5% would've been a massive boost. Somewhere like Letterkenny, in the Republic, which frankly is quite a small regional town nothing like the size of Londonderry, was attracting all the investment. It was about 10 miles away.

It was very clear that to do that we needed to have all the tools we possibly could have in our hands to help boost private economic activity and bring investment to Northern Ireland. From my own business experience, and all that I'd seen through the Blair period, this endless accretion of power to Europe was damaging business. I was beginning to become aware of the extraordinary hostility of the European Union to new technologies. This was all very bad news for Northern Ireland.

What you're bound to ask next is, 'What about the border?'. It never ever, ever crossed our minds there would ever be an issue to do with the Irish border because, when I was there, the physical manifestations of security arrangements, which were absolutely vital during the Troubles the watchtowers and the listening posts and all this sort of stuff they had all gone.

The border worked perfectly happily, but it was a border, nobody pretended otherwise. There is still a very clear border, there's a currency border, there's a VAT border, there's an excise duty border, there's a tax regime border. Until this whole thing was cooked up during the Brexit negotiations, there was no discussion at all of a problem on the border. I saw no problem at all in having separate jurisdictions.

UKICE: You were just mentioning your time at Defra, which obviously is one of the most EU-exposed departments in Whitehall. What was your take-out from your time at Defra about doing business in the EU?

OP: Well, about 90% of what Defra does is attempt to implement European law, until we left. I was there at the time of the CAP negotiation. I remember the first day at Defra they said, 'You're a frightfully busy person, an enormously important person, you probably won't have time to concentrate on these EU negotiations, but this is coming to a head'.

The Greeks had made a mess of it, not done anything. The Irish had a very good, competent, dynamic, agriculture minister, Simon Coveney, who has gone on to greater things. He was a very good person to do it. He had experience as his family had a big food business. The Irish were really going to get a grip of it during their presidency.

I said, 'Don't you believe it, it's completely ridiculous. This is easily the biggest thing that's happening for British agriculture and the environment, I will go to every meeting'. I spent a huge amount of time going to Brussels and Strasbourg and taking a personal lead in negotiations. Bizarrely, it sort of got back to my own private experience in business when I used to run COTANCE, the tanners association, running the meetings in French and translating for the Germans when they couldn't keep up. That all happened again. It was all quite useful, having my languages and ability to talk in a friendly basis.

I remember Ilse Aigner, she was the German agriculture minister. She came from Munich. I'd lived in Munich when I was at Cambridge, in theory, learning German. We talked about rococo churches for 20 minutes 'auf deutsch', which completely threw the civil service. I don't think they'd ever heard of it. The CAP negotiations were very odd, it sort of brought back from the depths of my memory how you do all this stuff. My previous life had been a very useful

experience. The CAP was fundamental and showed how appalling this system of European government was, because they were trying to impose an all-European environment policy.

I remember going to see the Commissioner, who was this francophone Romanian, called Dacian Ciolo?. I took along my colleague from Sweden, a really good guy, and a colleague from Spain. I said, ‘Look, you cannot impose a uniform environment policy’. My Swedish colleague was really good, he said to them, ‘Look, you’ve got to realise in northern Sweden it’s -45° in winter, there’s only one sort of Sitka spruce that survives’. Then Miguel Cañete from Spain said, ‘Hang on, I just have to point out in Andalusia there’s only one sort of olive that survives at +45° in summer’. I said, ‘Hang on, I come from North Shropshire. We represent temperate zones, you cannot impose this policy’.

They wouldn’t have it, so we had this mad thing on greening which was a ludicrously complex and expensive and wasteful system which has done real damage, of course, because we had compulsory rotation wholly unsuited to the UK countryside. We battled away and I had all sorts of alliances, but we got overruled, in the end, on most of them.

Then we had various euro dramas of some significance. We had horsemeat, which was a major excitement in which I took a real lead with Simon Coveney. It was very embarrassing for Simon Coveney because there was a burger plant in Ireland where they’d found they were tipping the odd pallet of horsemeat in. We convened an emergency meeting together in Brussels, where most people turned up.

I remember the Dutch weren’t very helpful because of the switching that was going on in Holland. Perfectly respectable shipments of horsemeat, all totally properly slaughtered and packed and invoiced by Romanian slaughterhouses, because at the time they were destocking the horse population of Romania which had been a major part of the transport system under the Communists, were being switched and re-emerging as beef from some strange Dutch warehouse with a dodgy company, I think registered in the British Cayman Islands.

I got on well with Stéphane Le Foll, the French socialist agriculture minister. He

was very difficult on a lot of euro stuff but he and I, on this, were very close. We worked together and we got a Europol case going.

Then the other huge row we had was on neonicotinoids, which showed European government at its very worst. There was this wholly malign arrangement where lobby groups pressurised unelected and media-sensitive EU rulers to do things in favour of lobby groups, who are very effective at putting political pressure on them.

So, the neonics case was very interesting. I did have allies. The Hungarians were very good. They've got a big honey production. They had two million hectares under neonics. I think three main crops, maize, rape, and sunflowers. They produce 20,000 tonnes of honey a year and they had absolutely clear evidence there was not a problem with neonics affecting honeybees.

There was this massive campaign. I had 85,000 emails to my private account in Parliament, which completely jammed up, which was appalling. If you needed a hip operation or something in Oswestry, I couldn't reply; my office obviously had a real struggle to cope with this deluge organised by these green groups.

I remember going to see the Environment Commissioner who was a nice man from Malta who was conservative and probably one of the few human beings who had fond memories of going to the conference in Blackpool. Tonio Borg he was called, he's a nice guy. I said, 'Look, the answer is to do more field trials'.

I had a very good scientific advisor, Ian Boyd. I said, 'We've got scientific evidence from real bees in real fields in the UK. Administered properly, neonics are far more benign'. I said, 'You've got to get, across Europe, more field trials'. As I said, we had some countries who were on side, such as the Hungarians, a small group of us.

He said, 'Oh no, I've got to do something'. I said, 'What you're going to do is disastrous. You're going to ban a benign and very effective pesticide. You will see production collapse of the products which it's supposed to protect and, absolutely guaranteed, farmers will fall back on horrible technologies from the 1950s and 60s which are really bad'.

I remember mentioning pyrethroids, which are terrible for the aquatic environment. They're really vile, horrible, and also the bugs get resistant to them.

He said, 'I've got to do something, we've got to be seen to be doing something'. So, they brought in this stupid ban and that was about as good an example as I remember of bad European government.

The system to vote against this stuff, getting the system to show I meant business, was just a major, major, event. We made it absolutely clear. I read my box, one Sunday night, and said, 'We're going to vote against this ban'. I got a phone call –'Are you absolutely sure Secretary of State?'. 'Yes, we've made a decision'.

Just by complete chance, I was in the NFU headquarters in Stoneleigh when this was going on.

Throughout the morning, I was in this meeting at Stoneleigh, and they kept ringing up from Brussels. I said, 'We're going to vote against'. They said, 'Are you absolutely sure?'. There was no question of me changing my mind.

You just saw there was this enormous pressure on highly intelligent, skilled, diplomats to go along with the consensus view, which is wholly malign, bad for agriculture, bad for the environment, bad for bees, bad for the aquatic environment, bad for employment, just bad all round.

What's happened since? We've seen a drastic reduction in rapeseed production. We used to be exporters, we've now brought in a million tonnes of rapeseed. We bring it from places like Ukraine. What do they use in Ukraine? They use neonics.
It's about as stupid an example of idiotic collapse and conceding defeat to lobbying pressure groups as you can get.

UKICE: Was there any area where you thought that we benefitted from EU membership, or was it just totally malign in your view? We asked Hilary Benn the reverse question and he came out with some of his frustrations with the EU.

OP: No, I can't. It was wholly malign. It was absolutely clear that you need policies to be made by democratically accountable ministers in a parliament where they were held to account. Time and again, ministers would go along and would stand up in Parliament saying, 'This is happening, there's an argument about this'. It happened with all the big treaties, 'We're going to bravely stand up and we're going to do this'.

Then it would begin to go wrong and they'd say, 'Well, these proposals, they're only proposals. We shouldn't be frightened, this is all alarmist stuff'. Then things would get worse. They would say, 'Well, we always said it might be difficult but we're going to hold out for this, we're going to be really brave'. Then we'd concede that and say, 'Well this is the downside when you share sovereignty, you don't always win, but we're part of this wonderful organisation, overall it's beneficial'. Invariably we'd get crushed.

Some British interests would get wiped. Then MPs would write to them and the minister would turn up in the House of Commons, having put the SI [statutory instrument] through, and just lamely say, 'There's nothing we can do about it, we were outvoted'.

Now there is no hiding. There is absolutely no excuse. Something stupid happens in agriculture now, you can have a UQ [urgent question], you can summon the minister, the minister can take a delegation to the minister, the minister is responsible and ultimately can get chucked out in an election.

Vote Leave and the referendum campaign

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): How soon after the election in 2015 did you get involved in the planning around a referendum?

Owen Paterson (OP): I was one of three MPs, there was Bernard Jenkin, Steve Baker, and me. We got hold of each other, literally the day after, and we said, 'What are we going to do? It looks like there's going to be a referendum'.

Yes, your archive has got a role here because we have the testament according to Cummings in the Tim Shipman book. This is broadly inaccurate on the early days setting up Vote Leave. As I remember, the morning of the

day after the election Steve Baker, Bernard Jenkin and I talked. We basically said: ‘Gulp, there’s going to be a referendum.’ We had prepared absolutely nothing. As I remember, we met quite rapidly and got hold of Tim Montgomerie. He said, ‘You’ve got to get hold of Dominic Cummings’

I’d had dealings with Dominic Cummings when I was Iain Duncan Smith’s PPS, we worked very closely. There’d been this referendum about the awful North East Assembly and Tim was really struck by the techniques that Dominic had used. Tim got hold of him and Dominic was really good, actually, he said, ‘Give me a week and I’ll come back with a proposal’. He came back with a sketch of how we would go about setting up a campaign.

It was absolutely clear, all through the months I was involved, that he would not be the leader of the campaign. He made it completely crystal clear from the beginning, he didn’t want to run it, but he would help us set it up and he would find premises and he would do all the techy stuff, get all the platforms up.

We met as a small group every week, I would think for six to nine months in my office. We called it the Exploratory Committee. He came back, and he was absolutely tremendous, it was fantastic what Dominic did. Forgetting what people say about him always briefing the press, none of this got out to the press. He basically set up the arrangements which then became Vote Leave. The surprise for me was that he suddenly took it over as the leader.

Bluntly, I always had it in my mind to go to Lynton (Crosby) to do it. I was a bit reticent about going to Lynton because he had just had an operation, and because he was very close to David Cameron. I thought, ‘We mustn’t put pressure on him’. Lynton was obviously very well disposed to what we were trying to do. Perhaps I was naïve looking back, but I always thought, in the end, we’d get Lynton to do it at the right time. That didn’t happen. I don’t think we ever even had a proper discussion with him.

Cummings took it over and got a complete grip on it. There was an abortive coup at one point (I was having an eye operation and was completely out of action) which consolidated Cummings’ position. Then he got a complete grip having put all his own people in. The rest, I’m sure you’ve got in accurate detail from other people. I became less and less involved and, during the referendum, I was sort of detached.

I went off to basically do agriculture and fish. I did a whole series of public meetings on ag and fish all around the country which was fun. It was nice bringing people back together again, because there were people in my patch who had gone off to UKIP, disaffected Tories, and there were people who were Labour who were very keen on re-establishing national government. It was actually rather fun bringing them all together. We all believe in the same thing.

I drifted more and more away from Vote Leave. I was allowed in on the main meetings on sufferance, but it was made quite clear I wasn't anything to do with the central direction of it. That was all run by Cummings.

UKICE: Did you think, throughout the referendum, 'We're going to win this, we've got lots of support in the Conservative party, it's going down well with the public'?

OP: No, no. It was way, way, beyond the Tory party. We were always going to win it, I had no doubt at all. It was far, far, more than the Tory party. I was very much convinced by that after staying with my brother-in-law, Matt Ridley, whose place was an operational centre for Vote Leave in the North East.

One of his guys came back. They'd had a competition that evening, canvassing in Sunderland, where they would give a pint to the first person who found a Remain voter. They were not going to vote to stay in the European Union, they voted to leave, they knew exactly what they were doing.

UKICE: Were you surprised by the number of Conservative MPs that came out for Leave? Because some of the Remain side clearly were slightly surprised at the depth of Leave support on the backbenches.

OP: No. The Tory party had practised a deceit on its own members for most of the time I'd been in Parliament, they were unrepresentative. The huge broad mass of Conservative members wants to see national government by national democratically elected politicians who can be chucked out at elections. All this Remain nonsense about 'Little Englanders' and going back to the empire and xenophobia… was incorrect. All the people I know are totally internationalist in their view and want the best possible relations with all our neighbours, whether they're in the European Union or out. They were driven by this idea of voting.

I remember, absolutely crystal clear, in the town where I was born, Whitchurch in Shropshire – it's rather convenient, all the polling stations are in the Civic Centre which is a great big barn of a building, six polling stations in one place. I was standing outside with my Vote Leave stickers on and about half a dozen guys came up covered in dust. They were roofers, they'd come off some building site covered in dust. They came straight up to me, before they went in to vote, which is quite rare.

Most people who'd gone in to vote, walking past, had been rather diffident and a bit, sort of, shifty, but then they came out with a huge grin and come up to me and say, 'Mr Paterson, I've voted to leave'. Going in they were rather more reticent.

These guys were the opposite, they stomped straight up to me and they said, 'Really good to see you Mr Paterson, glad to see you've got your Vote Leave sticker on. It's about 'Them' isn't it?'. I said, 'Them?'. 'It's about Them, we can't get rid of Them can we? We can never vote to get rid of Them'. I said, 'No, I suppose you can't'. And they said: 'And you can't either. We can vote for you, we can get rid of you, but there's nothing you can do about Them either. We're going to vote to leave now Mr Paterson'. That completely summed it up.

These people have been caricatured, ridiculed and mocked. They knew exactly what they were doing, and they were really proud of it.

The May negotiations and Northern Ireland

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): After Leave has won, David Cameron steps down. You backed Andrea Leadsom, I think, for the leader, but Theresa May ends up winning by default. How worried were you about someone who said she supported Remain being the Prime Minister to deliver Brexit?

Owen Paterson (OP): Very, because it was an existential moment for the British political class and system. It was absolutely outrageous what happened. David Cameron, in fairness, made it completely crystal clear this was a one-off and whatever the people decided would be delivered.

You've got this nonsense, when you look on Twitter and they talk about an

advisory referendum. It wasn't advisory at all. It was a decisive sovereign moment when Parliament, which was elected as a sovereign body, said it would give sovereign power, for a day, to the people to decide this massive question. That little anecdote I've given you showed that the people understood, with crystal clarity, what they were being asked to vote on, and they did accordingly in overwhelming numbers.

Then the whole ghastly establishment did its level best to frustrate what the people had agreed. It was absolutely shameful. It wasn't just people in the Tory party and the Labour party, you had these ridiculous so-called business organisations run by a lot of bureaucrats like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

You had huge, huge, prejudice in the electronic media. Looking back, the BBC's record was utterly disgraceful. People like me, if we went and did an interview, we never got to the verb in the first sentence before we were interrupted if we were allowed on. I thought it was a very dangerous moment, because there would've been such disillusion if Brexit hadn't been delivered. It was really bad, what was going on.

You had all the shenanigans with John Bercow and all the messing around with Hilary Benn. It was absolutely disgraceful. It was a concerted attempt to frustrate the very clearly expressed will of the British people in a very, very, clearly defined referendum. David Cameron made it totally clear it was not advisory.

So yes I was worried, it was a really appalling time. We had all these cliff-edge votes and endless stuff going on.

I became increasingly worried about Northern Ireland. My permanent secretary, Julian King, who I brought up from Dublin where he had been ambassador, was very good and had a very detailed knowledge of Ireland, north and south. He actually went on to greater things, he became our EU Commissioner. I met him at the Arc he said, 'Owen, I'm really worried. The Commission is only listening to the republican point of view, you've got to get Unionists over here to put their point of view'.

So I did go over, I took David Trimble and I organised a meeting with Michel

Barnier and Sabine Weyand. We made this point that there is not a problem on the border. There is a border today, as you and I are speaking, there is a clear border. I just said it earlier, there is a VAT border, there's a tax border, there's an excise duty border, there's a currency border, there is no problem with the border, it can all be done electronically. All this utter nonsense that there will be a revival of dissident activity or whatever, or there are going to be customs posts – there wouldn't be any customs posts.

UKICE: Was that pre or post the joint report?

OP: I think that was about October 2018, probably.

UKICE: Just before May got her withdrawal agreement?

OP: Yes. Julian King was really worried. He said, 'Nobody is enunciating, describing, the attitude of unionists and the dangers of some sort of border in the Irish Sea'. Barnier was very good. Of course, huge respect for David Trimble, a Nobel Prize winner in Europe is a big, big deal. They listened very carefully to him with great respect. David Trimble has been completely accurate on this, there is absolutely no need to have any nonsense on any of these borders, it can all be done electronically.

I went to Rotterdam and we measured exactly the distance from where containers are unloaded: 35,000 containers a year of the most contentious material, i.e. food, fish, and animal products. The formal border inspection post is 40km from the disembarkation point. Well over 99% go through without being physically inspected, and that's the most contentious material coming from miles outside the European Union, stuff from Australia and Brazil and everywhere. It's all done on algorithms, it's all done on intelligence, and it works extremely well.

There might be an outbreak of foot and mouth in some remote province in a corner of Brazil, but that will come through and they will pick up what's been done.

It is utterly disgraceful what's happened on the Northern Ireland border. There's been absolutely shameful exploitation of it, with very bad consequences which carry on today. The Protocol cannot be allowed to be a

permanent solution. It was never intended to be a permanent solution; it was always temporary. The continued Protocol was why I was one of only two MPs that did not vote, in the end, for Boris Johnson's agreement, on the grounds of the real danger of sticking a border down the Irish Sea which is totally contrary to the Act of Union.

Back then the UK Parliament and the Irish Parliament voted that there would be no impediments to any trade between Ireland and UK. We've gone and done that, it's wrong.

Fish was the other area. Way back in 2005, after Iain Duncan Smith was defenestrated, Michael Howard appointed me as Shadow Minister of Ag and Fish.

I made it my job to go all around the UK. It was completely fascinating, I went to all the most wonderful, remote, parts of the UK. Coming from landlocked Shropshire, it was absolutely fascinating to go up to say, Whalsay in the Shetlands and go to Kilkeel in Northern Ireland and down to Hastings in Kent.

I then made a point of going around North Atlantic fishing countries which ran sane policies in tune with nature, and have thriving, prosperous marine environments, as well as happy, prosperous fishermen, and growing investment in very remote coastal towns. We produced a Green Paper, which I published in 2005, and I still stand by every word. It was the first time a serious party had ever proposed repatriating a significant area of public policy from the EU.

I went to Norway, Faroes, Iceland, Newfoundland, down the coast of Canada, the eastern seaboard of the US. I had been to the Falklands as well, a very interesting lesson on surveillance. We did this Green Paper which was all about national and, above all, local control. The local control part is very, very important. I have always pursued fish right through. I'm afraid the settlement last year was wholly unsatisfactory for our fishing industry. On those two grounds, Northern Ireland and fish, I was one of only two Conservative MPs who didn't vote for the final agreement.

UKICE: You've talked a bit about talking to Barnier about the European Research Group's proposals on how to solve the Irish border. What contacts

and impact do you think you had talking to the May Government, the officials, your successors as Northern Ireland Secretary, or anyone? There was a brief period when the May Government was pursuing Alternative Arrangements after the Brady amendment in Parliament.

OP: I grandly say I chaired the meetings with the civil servants on the Alternative Arrangements. We got people like Shanker Singham along, going over all the different options. Those meetings were productive. We came up with some very sensible proposals, most of which have been ignored. We did have regular contacts, we were endlessly going off to see people, Number 10 or wherever, meetings with Olly Robbins. I'm sure one of the anoraks will have kept a diary. I just remember a whole blur of endless meetings.

The Alternative Arrangements were quite a major element which I was very much involved in. I think we met every couple of weeks or three weeks, going over the alternatives, and produced some good stuff. At the ERG, we produced a paper on the Northern Ireland border, how you would do it, which we wrote with people like Theresa Villiers who was very much involved and bravely supported it.

We were very much on the front foot. The ERG obviously played a major role. It wasn't just the main political focus and coordinating people's activity in Parliament, it was very much producing a lot of material which was relevant to negotiations.

UKICE: Why do you think the ERG document, which provided an alternative to the Chequers plan when it came to the Irish border, wasn't taken up by the May Government?

OP: I don't know, they were just totally mis-advised on the Irish border. Partly because, throughout the whole thing, there was this lurking hope among the Remainer interest that they could still scuttle Brexit. They found a really good weapon in Northern Ireland; everybody is frightened of Northern Ireland going wrong again.

I think the then Taoiseach was very, very, unwise because, whatever happens with the European Union, the Republic of Ireland is bound into the UK economy. Relations with the UK are far more important for the future of Ireland

than the EU. He allowed himself to be used as a weapon, and they were brutal in weaponising it. You know, the shocking comment from Martin Selmayr that losing Northern Ireland is a price the UK will have to pay for Brexit.

I think there were significant Remainer elements in Northern Ireland. The business organisations in Northern Ireland have done Northern Ireland a great disservice. They consistently and still are, even this week, talking about harmonisation and going along with European rules, totally oblivious to the damage these rules actually do to thriving businesses that want to get ahead and use modern technologies and who mostly trade with GB and not the EU. So, there was a strong Remainer element there.

UKICE: How did Michel Barnier react to your proposals?

OP: He listened very carefully. Of course, we have pursued these proposals since. I set up the think tank, Centre for Brexit Policy, and with David Trimble, we have published a paper on Mutual Enforcement, where you don't need to have borders because everything can be done electronically. He was very interested in that.

I remember having a very clear discussion with Sabine Weyand. She was going on about the Single Market. I said, 'We have the deepest respect for the Single Market, and if we sell into the Single Market in the future we will match your standards. If we sell into the Chinese market, we will match their standards. If we sell into the United States, we will match their standards. How we get there is entirely our problem, but we will guarantee that we match your standards'. That is the essential, very simple, basis of Mutual Enforcement. Barnier showed real interest in this at our meeting.

Of course, for the whole European Project, getting there is part of building a state. It's not just getting uniform standards, it's using a uniform cross-Europe system of getting there, which is European government. I said, "Don't worry how we arrive at them, we will match your standards."

Barnier was really interested in this. That's what's so sad; there was an opportunity missed. There were so many Remainer forces hoping that they could keep us in the Single Market and all the rest of it, and keep us within the orbit of all this regulation, that the opportunity was lost.

UKICE: One of the things that people seemed to always think was that, at the end of the day, Germany would come to the UK's aid and push through some changes because of its trade interests in the UK economy. You clearly understand Germany and France, you're one of the few members of Parliament, I think, who speaks fluent French and German, and you've done loads of business in the EU.

Did you think that the UK negotiators were not understanding the EU, and the EU was not understanding the point of Brexit? They're not getting the Leave argument about what Brexit is supposed to be trying to achieve.

Did you think the two sides were talking past each other most of the time, or was it more wilful than that?

OP: I think that always was a real problem. They just couldn't understand it at the political level. I remember I went to Berlin with John Longworth to address the Toenissteiner Kreis, which would've been possibly January 2019, when things were getting far on. You had an extraordinary array of the great and the good of Germany, so there were MEPs and there were people from the Bundestag and people from the Länder. All the big business organisations were there. There was, just, this extraordinary unity.

I think, probably, at the beginning, we were at fault. We always thought that ultimately German businesses would use their clout on the political system. We had all these figures, 'One in seven German cars is sold here', and all the rest of it. There are huge German interests in continuing to sell goods to the UK. I think we could be criticised, as we always felt that those interests would turn. I think we underestimated the extraordinary grip the political project has. They didn't budge.

I think the other thing we underestimated, and, I think, we couldn't understand, is how they couldn't get the point of Brexit. They just didn't understand. They couldn't understand the mentality of those roofers in Whitchurch, The European elites still see this project as wholly benign, and I see as mainly malign.

There is only one continent with a slower rate of growth in the world, and that's Antarctica. If the penguins get their act together, the European Union might fall

behind them. It has brought disaster to many people. Look at the catastrophe of Greece driven by this extraordinary brutal imposition of ideology, the idea that ever closer union is a good thing.

Brexit in Parliament

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When you saw Parliament making a real meal of getting the Withdrawal Agreement through in that first quarter of 2019, and it came down to the third meaningful vote and you were one of the people who held out, one of the Spartans, did you worry that vote might squeak through?

Indeed, did you ever worry that parliamentary opposition to this Withdrawal Agreement could be putting the whole of Brexit at risk, because it might be reopening a path to a second referendum or the fall of the Government?

Owen Paterson (OP): Yes, of course we worried the whole time. We had years of worry. I mean it's coming up to five years. We're still not out of the woods on this thing, we've still got the nightmare of the Protocol, so we're still not there yet.

You've still got all these Remain elements. I'm amazed, today, how the Remainers are still at it, I find it extraordinary. I really thought, perhaps I was being naïve, that they would finally accept that it's happened, that Boris got it through. Okay, it's unsatisfactory to people like me, but broadly it's gone through, by a big majority.

They haven't settled down at all. I mean, come on, look at the attacks on someone like me on Twitter. They are completely raving, every day.

It was a very bitter battle. I was very much more worried about the damage to the whole political system. If the political system had frustrated the British people, it would have been shameful.

We're all a bit smug. We got through the 1920s and the 1930s and the 1940s and we came out of it very proud of our record, we never really put to the test just what sort of nasty things would've come out of the woodwork.

I was genuinely worried about what the public reaction would've been. It would've been so shameful if people had been deprived of what they voted for in a very honest, open, referendum campaign. I repeat for the third time, if not the fourth, it was absolutely clear- David Cameron could not have made it clearer- that it was a one-off vote and it was decisive. Parliament had ceded sovereignty to the people on that issue.

I've no regrets of being a Spartan. Mark Francois has got the next door office to me, we talked a lot and I was very much involved in who was involved at the top of the ERG. We were quite clear we were doing the right thing.

UKICE: You mentioned you were talking to David Trimble. Were you talking to the DUP? Obviously the May Government was trying to woo the DUP with lots of assurances that the rest of the UK would stay aligned if Northern Ireland was forced to align through the Protocol.

OP: Yes, yes, we talked to the DUP a lot.

UKICE: Did you ever think they might crack and back the deal?

OP: No, I didn't. They were very staunch, actually. We had an absolutely wonderful later visit to Brussels; I took Diane Dodds and Arlene Foster to see Barnier and Sabine Weyand again. That was absolutely fascinating, The EU political project met Ulster Unionism head-on. Two vast megalithic political juggernauts went head-to-head, and nothing budged. There was a great moment when Weyand threatened to flounce out, slapped the papers down and grabbed her pen. I remember looking at Arlene and she smiled for the first time. She knew, having been through the horrors of negotiation in Northern Ireland, we'd actually scored a point there and we were winning.

It was quite obvious that the European side had never seen anything like them. Diane Dodds is marvellous, just very quiet, very articulate, made it completely clear that what they were proposing was totally unacceptable. It was one of the most interesting meetings I've ever, ever, organised.

Boris Johnson's Brexit

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we then roll forward to further

extensions, Boris Johnson becomes Prime Minister. Were you surprised at the deal he finally did? Did you expect him to go for no deal?

Owen Paterson (OP): We were, obviously, very instrumental in getting Boris elected. Iain Duncan Smith and I were quite involved with that early on and got him meetings with the ERG, which actually happened in my office. He was very clearly put on the spot and gave some clear answers.

I think, historically, that was very significant because, for the whole of the ERG, to a man and woman, to vote for him sent a massive signal out to the membership, which we touched on in the earlier discussion, which is very strongly for national democratic government. It sent a completely clear message that this guy is what the ERG wants, without a single person abstaining or speaking against him. Everybody spoke up for Boris, and that sent a huge signal. He won a landslide with the membership. Of course, that had a spin-off in the general election.

By then I wasn't really, that much, involved in negotiations. Since then, I have set up this think tank, The Centre for Brexit Policy. We did push very hard not to have an extension. We did a paper on not having an extension and we've done quite a lot of stuff on Mutual Enforcement, working with David Trimble closely on that. Basically, we set it up, rather naively perhaps, to see how we could concentrate on the benefits of Brexit and how we could move onto agriculture policy and industrial policy.

We were bogged down, last year, on actually getting the thing done properly. That's what took up most of our time, but we weren't quite so involved with the nitty-gritty as we had been before with the ERG.

UKICE: Johnson's first Withdrawal Agreement, you could see, was putting really quite a deep border down the Irish Sea in terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol. He signed up to the one that Theresa May had said no Prime Minister could accept, more or less, plus the consent mechanism.

OP: Yes. I voted for that the first time on the grounds that it was temporary, that it was going to go. That had to be muddled through before he had his majority.

UKICE: Yes. How did you think it was going to go?

OP: I quoted Michael Collins actually, whose comment on the first treaty with Lloyd George was that – it's a very good quote, sorry I'm paraphrasing it – 'We've bought the freedom to win our freedom', which I think was applicable in this case. I felt we had to swallow the inequity of the Protocol. I voted for that on the strict understanding that it would go, that it would be washed away in a comprehensive free trade agreement and it was only temporary. It never occurred to me it would still be around.

UKICE: But from the EU point of view, it could only be washed away by something going back towards Chequers, couldn't it? I mean where did you think those negotiations could conceivably go that would supersede the need for the Protocol?

OP: No, because we'd done all the stuff on the Alternative Arrangements. You know, we'd got into the Selmayr stuff which we'd learned going to Rotterdam. We'd begun to raise this idea of mutual enforcement by then, so there were lots of ways of sorting it out.

UKICE: So you thought that was negotiable?

OP: Yes, the whole thing on the Irish border was wholly, wholly exaggerated. The vast majority are major shipments by highly respectable major international companies who are perfectly capable of invoicing stuff in different currencies with different excise duties on all their agricultural products. It's the same milk from the same cows on the same farm on the same tanker on the same road to the same dairy in Monaghan. It used to be Monaghan Dairies, it's now called LacPatrick owned by Lactalis. All this, I always said, was wholly, wholly, exaggerated and it was used as a political weapon.

UKICE: When you were voting for the Northern Ireland Protocol in the first Withdrawal Agreement, did you get the impression from David Frost and Boris Johnson that they thought they could easily negotiate all of that in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, because once they've got the legal commitment, the EU has to agree to doing that? Obviously, you were suspicious of the EU's motivation from the way they treated Northern Ireland through the process, the Selmayr comment you mentioned, and things like that.

OP: Yes. Well, perhaps we took it on trust that it would go, but that was my understanding, that it was not a permanent arrangement. It absolutely must not be.

UKICE: What did you make of the purging of Conservatives who'd voted for the Benn-Burt Act? Were you worried about some people who'd, arguably, only rebelled once suddenly being chucked out of the party, such as Philip Hammond, Ken Clarke, Nicholas Soames? Quite distinguished Conservatives, you could argue.

OP: I found all that very sad, but I thought they had brought it upon themselves. I didn't have a lot of sympathy. My sympathies were wholly with the vast majority of Conservative membership who had been misrepresented for decades by a political elite atop the Tory party, denying what they really wanted. My sympathies were with the people who voted, in the referendum, which were an overwhelming majority in my constituency. My majority has gone from 2,195 votes to just under 23,000.

That's because I represent, I hope, what they think. I know that a political elite were deliberately using every possible mechanism to frustrate those voters. It's sad, they were really nice guys, a lot of them were good friends of mine. You know, someone like Oliver Letwin was at Cambridge with me, he's a really good friend of ours. It was sad.

This was the biggest issue that we'll ever come across in our lifetime: 'Who makes our rules? Who makes the rules and can we chuck the rascals out?'. It's pretty fundamental.

UKICE: If we roll forward a year to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement unveiled on the 24 December 2020, I think you abstained in the final vote. Did you think that this was a disappointing agreement? What were your reservations about the final version of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement that the Prime Minister signed?

OP: Well, I made it very public. I had long discussions and John Redwood and I talked in detail about what we were going to do and in simple terms we concluded, in all fairness, that we couldn't vote against it, after all that we had done to try to get Brexit through. This was a massive improvement on the

UK's position and on the UK voters' position, compared to where we were under all the horrors of Blairism with Nice and Amsterdam and Lisbon. Obviously, it made poor old David Cameron's negotiations look comical. It was a massive improvement.

However, having spent so many years on the fishing industry, I know that if we do bring back control, it would just be such a wonderful boon to our marine environment and fishing industry. If we ran our marine environment properly and sensibly, instead of throwing a million tonnes of dead fish back into the sea every year, it would bring real prosperity to some of the most remote communities across the UK which would be cash positive, that would actually generate wealth.

Then I felt very strongly about Northern Ireland. We've gone into this in some detail. It was very, very, wrong to use the totally bogus scare on the Northern Ireland border as a weapon to try to bully the whole of the UK into staying in the Single Market and all the rest of it.

On those grounds, John Redwood and I had some discussions and, we agreed to abstain.

The future of Brexit

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): If we look forward, one of the things that Brexit has done is put a question mark over the future of the UK, both potentially in Northern Ireland, where the Protocol could be argued to be ushering in greater economic integration with the south, and Scotland, where it has given the SNP a pretext to re-raise the prospect of an independence referendum.

We know, from polling, that quite a lot of Conservative members regard the union, if that dissolves, as a price worth paying for the right sort of Brexit, for England and possibly Wales. How do you make the argument to Scotland that the arguments that applied for Brexit about national control and sovereignty don't apply to them as Scotland?

Owen Paterson (OP): I've always been very critical of the devolution settlement. I was involved in all the debates very early on. In my first

Parliament, 1997, there were no Tory MPs in Wales. I was the nearest thing to a Tory MP. Looking out the window, Wales starts 50 yards from my bottom gate, and I was on the Welsh Affairs Committee. I spoke out against this. Of course, devolution in Wales only scraped through by a miserable margin. I think it was 183 votes per constituency.

Around here, I'm sitting six or seven miles south of Wrexham, which has nothing to do with South Wales or Cardiff or Swansea. Wrexham is very largely part of an area including Chester, Liverpool, Manchester, the North West economy, and is a huge industrial base in its own right. The North East Wales industrial zone looks to its neighbours in England, so I was always very, very sceptical of devolution.

In Scotland, I remember Donald Dewar very, very clearly saying, 'Don't worry, devolution will drain the nationalists' support'. It hasn't at all, it's just given the nationalists a huge platform. There's a lot of talk about names, it was going to be an executive and of course it immediately became the government and all this stuff.

I remember very early on in David Cameron's leadership campaign, saying it was a disgrace that only 15% of the UK population had been consulted on the potential breakup of the UK. We should have an all UK-referendum on whether these devolved institutions should continue. That didn't go down very well with the Cameron team. We are reaping the consequences of it. We've created this muddle now and you can't serve two masters.

UKICE: Do you think it's possible, though, for Eurosceptics to make the case against Scottish Independence?

OP: Yes, because Scotland benefits massively being part of the UK. What I'm saying is, I think the devolution settlement is very unsatisfactory and is a much bigger spur than the Brexit issue. What we've got to do, which I think in fairness the Government is trying to do, is to sell the benefits.

If you go back to my Defra stuff, easily our biggest food and drink export is Scotch whisky which is an absolute world-leader. Whilst I was at Defra, we did lots for the Scotch Whisky industry, which happened to have as its director a certain David Frost, so I got to know David quite well. The opportunity was

completely wonderful. I remember two little instances. One is quite a jolly instance; I remember standing at the British Embassy in Berlin regaling the assembled German elite that the French drink more Scotch whisky in a month then the French drink French Cognac in a year. The place erupted, there was a huge roar. It was a fantastic, popular, thing to say.

The real interests I had were countries like India. When I was doing it, we reckoned that with the local taxes and the national taxes and all the rest of it, there was about a 550% tax on whisky. There is this long tradition of whisky drinking going back to the Raj when, bluntly, the locals and the British squaddies and people had to put up with some local brew with a glorious Scotch name and only the officers and the ICS, brought in real Scotch whisky. There's still this huge cachet of Scotch whisky, they pay crazy prices.

With the enormous increase in prosperity in India, which is going to obviously, hopefully, really thunder ahead, we thought, if we could get the duty down to 30%, there would not be enough distilling capacity in the whole of Scotland to satisfy thirsty, discerning, Indian whisky drinkers.

I had a meeting quite soon after Brexit with one of the big distillery groups, and they were whinging on. It's just pathetic for distillery groups to be whinging on about Brexit. I said, 'I don't know what you're talking about, where are you planning to get the barley from, where are you going to get the glass made, where are you going to brew this stuff up, how on Earth are you going to cope with this huge demand coming down the track if we pull off these free trade deals?'. Their whole attitude was extraordinarily inward-looking.

That was one of the real damaging factors, I think, of the British state concentrating on trying to make Europe work- we've ignored the enormous opportunities around the world.

All this current wittering on about Australia and beef imports- my brother emigrated to Australia after BSE, he's been there for 22 years and is a beef farmer. There's absolutely no way they're going to mess around with the UK market when they've got better prices in nearer markets in Asia, but there will be real opportunities for things which they don't produce in Australia like whisky, possibly products or other things which we can produce.

I think it's really important we get on the front foot and explain to the Scots, and everyone else in the devolved parts of the United Kingdom, the massive advantages of working with the UK Government and staying part of the union.

UKICE: So, you'd see off the NFU critics who are very nervous, and just say, 'Actually you're just focusing on the wrong thing. Focus on the opportunities'.

OP: Yes, there are far bigger opportunities. I did a lot of papers from my thinktank called UK2020, soon after I left government. I made it very clear there are enormous opportunities. If you go to the agriculture section, there are enormous opportunities around the world for agricultural exports, but we've got to get to world prices and we've got to get rid of tariffs.

There's always an enormous 'but' in the centre. But there will be parts of the UK where, at world food prices, there will have to be some supplementary income because the land is not good enough to sustain an adequate level of income. As an example, in some remote areas, stock perform an incredibly important environmental function.

I've always quoted the Swiss. We did a study on the Swiss. Very large numbers of cattle and sheep and calves are lugged up the Alps in crawler gear very slowly in the summer months to perform an environmental function. They are paid more than the CAP payments. It's very easy to counter those areas where there is poor land which can only sustain thin stock populations, but there is a vital environmental service provided. It's quite legitimate for taxpayers to pay that money, because people come to the countryside for the landscapes and those landscapes are maintained by the farmers who graze them.

UKICE: Don't the Swiss also have huge restrictions on beef imports? You're checked if you drive in from France so you can't go and buy your beef there because it's less expensive.

OP: No, but I'm quoting that particular aspect of Swiss agricultural policy. They knowingly have some of the most expensive food produced on the planet which they subsidise in order to get the environmental benefit.

UKICE: A different way of doing it. If we were here in 2031, hopefully we're

still around then, what would a successful Brexit look like by then? What would you expect to see?

OP: Ten years' time. Well, I'm not an economist, but the UK being well on the way to becoming Europe's largest economy. Open free trade arrangements with the whole of North America, Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership will be well bedded in by then. The great hidden giant, I think, is Africa; there are enormous opportunities in Africa and South America, in working with them.

Hopefully the rancour and the bitterness and the spite, expressed currently by the European Union, will have dissipated, if the thing exists anyway, and if the Euro is still intact in ten years' time. One would have to say there are doubts. We wish them well. I am just surprised at how badly behaved they are at the moment.