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Working in Number Ten, Oct 2015 - June 2016

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Where were you working during the referendum campaign?

Matthew O'Toole (MO): I had been at the Treasury and had been promoted a couple of times to middle or senior middle management doing the economic spokesperson job, and reporting to the Director of Comms or the Chancellor's official spokesperson as one of their number twos. I left to work for a bank for just over a year, and then a role came up which I had previously interviewed for at Number 10 a few years before, which was Chief Press Officer, which is the same grade that I had been at a the Treasury.

I was not unbelievably fulfilled working in Canary Wharf for a bank, so I went back to the civil service. I got the job at Number 10 just after (David) Cameron had been re-elected, so he was in his pomp, but they had a small majority. Labour was at that point, I think, going through still a leadership contest, and the people were starting to talk about this renegotiation with the EU that was going to have to happen.

My role was leading up the economic section of Number 10 Comms, reporting to the Prime Minister's official spokesperson and coordinating other departments' economic communications. Usually, quite often, it was fighting

with them – particularly the Treasury – about what they were saying and doing. At that time, the (George) Osborne was in the Treasury – where I had previously worked – and most people were expecting that he would be taking over at Number 10.

Then, at some point, maybe round about six years ago, I was asked to take on the responsibility of helping to coordinate the civil service comms side of the renegotiations, because I had maybe a bit more experience than certain others. I knew that was going to be interesting, particularly leading up to the referendum.

I had less to do with the tram shuttling around capitals and the renegotiation, but I was starting to think about what the civil service bit of the comms at Number 10 and other departments needed to look like pre-referendum. But a lot of it was still held very close and that involved building relationships, obviously, with some of the senior spads. Looking back now, it was such a small amount of time that renegotiation took, but it seemed at the time to go on for ages, with Cameron going round all these capitals. In retrospect, relative to how long this has all been going on, it was over in the blink of an eye.

He did go round all these capitals, including going to see (Viktor) Orbán at his border wall. I think it was in February that we got to the European Union Council where he got the renegotiated deal under four headings and came back. There was a Saturday cabinet meeting – I remember that – and from that moment on we were really in the referendum campaign proper.

UKICE: As the official spokesman on this, did you think that the package held together and was quite an easy sell, or did you look at it and think, ‘We are going to have some challenges here persuading people that David Cameron’s got a reasonable deal’?

MO: I knew that the people who had, for example, renegotiated the stuff on financial services thought they had done a pretty good deal for the City. Whether you think that was a healthy priority to have or not is another question – but they thought this was actually pretty substantial, in relative terms.

But I think relative to where expectations were, particularly in parts of the Tory media and more Eurosceptic press, on social security and immigration, we

knew that this was going to be tough. But we realised that relatively late in the process.

I think people were realistic that, given the volume and weight of Euroscepticism in the most popular parts of the press, the deal was going to be a real tough sell, but not that it was going to be a hugely overwhelming let down or a completely futile effort, followed by a really tough referendum campaign. I don't think that was the vibe.

There was a running issue we had at the time around new data that emerged on National Insurance numbers and the issuing of National Insurance numbers. That was a particular headache and led to a very, very difficult series of headlines, because essentially it involved what was reported as a corrected number on EU migrants over the previous five years.

There was one particular journalist who was really good and who was on it, Alberto Nardelli, and Jonathan Portes, I remember there being a particular concern about how we were going to handle it, because the numbers were going to lead to challenging headlines, and they did.

UKICE: How difficult was it operating in Number 10 during the campaign, with the scrutiny around the roles which civil servants could take from David Cameron's Eurosceptic wing, and on how Purdah should be applied during the Campaign? Did you feel constrained?

MO: There was definitely a lot of political noise about it. Personally, I didn't find it unbelievably constrained, bearing in mind that the civil service had worked fairly robustly on the No side of the Scottish referendum campaign, particularly in the Treasury where I was at the time.

There was a record of HMG, as it were, taking a fairly robust approach where the Government had a decided position. And, it is a fact that the learned experience of the 2014 referendum was replicated in the Brexit referendum, in messaging terms, and almost in philosophic terms, in terms of how it was approached it and the framing of the debate. The fact was that the civil service was fairly robust then, and was robust again, although maybe slightly less robust than in 2014.

There probably was a little bit more noise about the civil service being impartial in 2016, although, certainly in 2014, the then Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, made certain noises about the Treasury. So, it wasn't, completely, without precedent.

I remember there being a lot of controversy over the cost of the referendum leaflet that went to every household in the UK, the explanatory note. A lot of my day job would have been overseeing the production of lobby scripts and then talking about them to the PM's spokesperson and figuring out lines to take for the rest of Whitehall on issues like that. There was a debate about all that, and about how that part of the campaign was landed.

Personally, I don't remember feeling hugely constrained. Obviously, people had been through elections, where you have to be aware of further constraints. I would say that civil servants who are press officers during moments like the run-up to referendum campaigns definitely have to be more alert and constantly self-conscious of what civil service impartiality will allow you to do. I think that is inevitable, and I say this as someone who is now a politician.

I can say now, because I am a politician, that I was strongly in favour of a Remain vote, but I was an impartial civil servant. I can remember specifically asking, slightly naively – almost to get an on-the-record 'no' – if it would be completely beyond the realms of propriety for me to go out and do some Remain canvassing in the final weeks of the Referendum. I knew the answer, but I wanted to say that I had asked the question, because I felt so strongly. But I was told "no" by Sue Gray.

UKICE: Some of your political colleagues at Number 10 were quite active in the official Remain campaign. Did you have a lot of insight into what was going on in the Remain campaign from your side of the Number 10 comms effort, or was it quite well compartmentalised between you and the 'official guys' at home base, and people like Craig Oliver and co who go off to do Remain stuff somewhere else?

MO: It was really compartmentalised, in the sense that we weren't in the Remain campaign, as we were coordinating and getting out the Government's message. But it is true to say that people like Craig Oliver, Ameet Gill, Adam Atashzai, and then a range of other special advisors from that era were, at a

certain point, involved with the Remain campaign. At times it did feel like Number 10 was the central hub of the Remain campaign, and though it wasn't the Remain campaign officially, it was the central hub of lots of the communications.

There was a central hub of civil servants in Number 10 and the Treasury in particular, but then occasionally people from across Whitehall, who would meet twice a week. I remember we had very early morning meetings where I had to be in Number 10 for about 7:30 am from about February onwards until late May, until Purdah started.

It was a fairly gruelling time for the civil servants. It did feel, at times, that we were effectively the central hub of the campaign. Clearly we weren't, because we weren't the designated Remain campaign. So, I would say in a weird way, the lines were clearly drawn because official Remain campaign people were not in those meetings, and it was clearly delineated. At the same time, we were told what was happening in the Remain campaign to the extent that it was relevant to understand the grid of Government activity.

For example, I would be told that X department should not be doing this thing on Y date, because we are expecting Corbyn to do something that day, if you see what I mean. In that case, we should either not do it, or do it badly. That, obviously, was coming from the Remain campaign, which was in touch with Labour and the Lib Dems and the trade unions, and all the other arms of the campaign.

There was no moment when you were in the room with all the Remain campaign and with Will Straw. But it did feel like Whitehall was the central organising thrust, frankly, of the campaign, certainly during the runup to Purdah.

UKICE: When you were sitting there watching this unfold and looking at the grid, as one of the relatively few Northern Irish people at the table, did you ever say, 'Northern Ireland is a bigger issue than you think'?

Did you get the sense that the people running the Remain campaign got what this might mean for Northern Ireland at all, from David Cameron downwards?

MO: Yes to both of those things, but only up to a point. There was an understanding of how unique the challenges would be, but still nowhere near enough acknowledgement of how huge and fundamental it would be. I became, probably, a bit annoying to a couple of people, in that I was quite repetitive about it, and became more so. There were some planned visits for Cameron. Cameron did a cross-UK visit, I think in the immediate aftermath of the deal, and went to a farm in County Antrim, and posed with a baby lamb or something. He started talking about things like how Northern Ireland is receiving about 10% of the CAP payments that came to the UK despite making up about 2% of the UK population. So Northern Ireland was hugely, wholly disproportionately reliant on agricultural subsidies. We were talking about those types of things.

The question of the border was talked about in different ways, both in the run-up and in the campaign proper. I was the most vocal and repetitive person in Number 10 on it, and I dosed and harassed people. Dosed is a good Northern Irish word.

People in the machine recognised that this needed to be a bigger part of the campaign, and occasionally I would clash with people – not in a really major way, but probably in a harassing, slightly irritating, ‘why is this guy still going on about this’ way.

It wasn’t necessarily that in the event there of a Leave vote, this wasn’t going to be a big challenge. It wasn’t that people didn’t think that. I can remember specifically a very senior person, not Cameron himself, but a very senior person expressing and confirming his own view that this was the most serious and problematic part of a Leave vote. But the judgement that it would be the most serious and problematic part of a Leave vote is not the same thing as them having a political campaign, a judgement, that this is the way to avoid a Leave vote, if you see what I mean.

So, I was quite repetitive. Some of it was about personal emotion. Not to sound narcissistic, but I did very much feel personally exposed by it. Part of the basis on which I was a Number 10 civil servant and was able to be a Number 10 civil servant, was in jeopardy from a Leave vote, and I still feel that. In quite a personal sense, for someone from my background with my mix of political and personal and familial influences, the UK leaving the European Union would

entail such a fundamental change in the UK state that it would have been hard for me to be a civil servant in Number 10. I

That is part of the reason that has motivated me the entire way through – I did feel very, literally, personally affronted, in the sense that it made me reassess my capacity to work there in that context. I mean I was an Irishman and Irish passport holder, from a moderate nationalist background and my entire comfort with working at the centre of the UK state was at least part due to common membership of the EU. The EU was at the core of the acceptability of the constitutional settlement for people like me.

There were multiple conversations about it, and I would parry and dose, and people agreed. There were certain people who were more sceptical than others – like Ameet Gill. People were not necessarily dismissive of the issue, but very sceptical that it was going to be a campaign winning issue. Given what has happened since, it is probably hard to disagree with the idea that English voters cared all that much, or that the swing voters were going to care all that much about it.

There were particular campaign moments, things that I pushed for, where I was the most vocal person on it. It did come up in the campaign, in particular ways. (Tony) Blair and (John) Major did their visit to Magee College at Derry. Theresa May did a visit at one point. Osborne did a visit, I think, to Warrenpoint Port. Cameron did multiple visits.

The Irish Embassy was encouraging these things to happen, and you would end up going over the head of the Northern Ireland Office, which basically had to be semi-frozen out, because Theresa Villiers was the Secretary of State. It is mad to think now, that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was one of the most prominent Brexiteers in Cabinet at the time.

It was clear that soft pedalling, and giving Brexiteers lots of space in Cabinet to do and say what they liked, created challenges. It particularly created challenges in Northern Ireland, because at the time you had the actual serving Northern Ireland Secretary dismissing all this on the TV.

The thing to do would have been to say, ‘The Northern Ireland Secretary’s talking nonsense on this’, but of course that wasn’t going to happen, because

there was a broader decision that had been made to not have ‘blue-on-blue conflict’. That turned out, in retrospect, to have been a mistake in my view.

UKICE: So you are sitting there, you are frustrated you can’t campaign for Remain, and you are worried that it will basically affect your career if the UK votes to leave. Were you surprised by the result?

Could you talk us through the tumultuous events that followed from the perspective of an official spokesman in Number 10? You have a Prime Minister looking at the result and deciding he has to announce his resignation – how were those 24 hours for you?

MO: I stayed in Number 10 that night, so it was personally strange, because my now wife and I were moving house. We were moving from a flat in Hackney to a flat we were buying in New Cross, and the flat was mostly but not entirely packed up. I left at about 7 o’clock on the evening of the 23 June. There was such bizarre weather that evening; it was really thundery and stormy in London. It is not post-hoc reframing it, but at the time it did feel a bit prophetic. It felt like something was about to happen.

I got on the tube and got into Westminster, and they were nervous. There was food out in one room in Number 10 and people were milling about the state rooms in Number 10, people around Cameron and Osborne and various SPADs.

I wasn’t there to socialise, so I went down to my desk to be ready to do whatever and I stayed there. I remember the first results coming in and I remember someone hopping up and down from their desks. I remember people staring in silence and the tension and then at a certain point I went to bed.

Number 10 isn’t huge, and there aren’t huge numbers of meeting rooms, and so there were camp beds laid out in one of the first floor meeting rooms. I think I was the first person at about, maybe, 2:33am, to go to bed, and in a weird way I think I just knew what was coming, because by that stage my phone just kept going. I had said to colleagues that I was going to try and get a few hours’ sleep, and then I got out of bed at about 4:30am, 5:00am, and people were crying and it was all very fairly surreal.

And at that stage there were still conversations deciding whether he was going to resign, and obviously that account has been given from people who are more authoritative than me. But the thing that I suppose I most remember is just going back to the Number 10 press office.

The strange thing about the way Number 10 works is that, very often, the beginning to how you deal with a controversy is almost a blank sheet of paper, and you just write down what the issue is, and you just literally have to start a lobby script.

So, there was that moment where you would just open a blank Word document and start. Helen Bower was then the official spokesperson, so I was reporting to her, and we were just like, 'What the hell do we say about this?'. There was lots of very, very senior people whose jobs it is to be extremely together, who were in a sort of shock.

The weird thing from my perspective was how quickly the political focus of the job changed to be, 'We have to give Cameron a positive send-off somehow'. At the time, that was pretty craven and depressing really. I remember there was some event he was going to, the Farnborough Air Show or something, a week or two afterwards, and there was a whole thing about whether there would be a jobs announcement. You sort of think, 'This is not really commensurate with the seriousness of what has happened here, just trying to get him a few piddly jobs announcements so that he can say, 'And in the last six years I have done X, Y and Z and I am glad to announce this jobs announcement''.

Also at the same time, the Tory leadership contest was this weird spectacle, with obviously Johnson and (Michael) Gove self-immolating, and it came down to (Andrea) Leadsom and (Theresa) May. I can remember a slightly strange farewell party that Cameron had for the staff. It was just a bit weird. Some of it was shellshock, I am sure, from both the official machine and the politicians, but the response didn't feel commensurate to the seriousness of what had just happened and what was to come.

Working in Number Ten, June 2016- September 2017

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): You had said that you had thought that

you couldn't stay in Number 10 in the event of a Leave vote, but then you are tipped into the Cameron resignation, and a new Conservative Prime Minister coming in. What made you hang on in there for another year or so?

Matthew O'Toole (MO): It was more than a year. The short answer is, I was just about to get married. I don't think I had sat down and said, 'If there is a Leave vote I am definitely leaving the civil service', it was just that I felt so passionately about it. I knew instinctively that this would be really difficult.

You didn't know how politics was going to react to the result. You didn't know that the May Government was going to come in and set these red lines, and it was going to be so difficult and set the worst possible red lines in terms of the Irish question. A lot of my general feeling about Brexit and Northern Ireland and my position wasn't just on the question of whether there will be a hard border, but whether there literally would be customs posts again on the border.

I thought that would have been bad. As someone who comes from a, what would have been called a moderate nationalist background, I now represent a moderate nationalist party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, but also a Social Democratic and therefore a very strongly pro-European party. All those things interact with one another, so they are not simple, and they are hard to explain to people.

It will sound corny, but intellectually and ethically John Hume was really important for my party, but also for people from my background, because what he did was he said that narrow conceptions of nationalism and statehood and nation states don't have to be hang-ups anymore.

The European Union is a way out of this for us, particularly for people in Northern Ireland who perhaps didn't love the fact that the island of Ireland had been partitioned without their consent, but wanted an ethical and practical way to move beyond that without a period of huge violence.

What is a thoughtful, imaginative way to think your way around into a new position? In thinking of this jurisdiction, Northern Ireland and the whole island of Ireland, in a new context, you can get over some of these narrow nationalisms and narrow nation state definitions. Hume spent this huge amount of time selling the European project to people in Northern Ireland, particularly

from a nationalist background, as a way through that. That was never understood in London. That was the thing I felt most passionately about.

Yes, a border was a problem, but it was also about people talking about how people in the United Kingdom had never been sold the European project as something for them. I thought, 'That is not true. It is not true for me'. It is deeply, deeply important to me, and it was genuinely in a sense the basis on which I was able to be a UK civil servant. Not because I was hostile to the UK state, but because lots of people from my background were hostile to the UK.

It had completely reframed what the UK was and how the UK and Ireland interact with one another, and I could be totally comfortable as a British civil servant on that basis, but the vote changed something quite fundamental for me.

It does become harder when you are writing lines which are becoming more and more bullishly Eurosceptic, and it feels more fraudulent. Even when you are a press person in Number 10, you are always an impartial civil servant, but you are closer to that line, obviously. You have to be aware of that line more than someone who is doing a policy job in Defra or are working in operations for DWP, because of the job you do.

The autumn of 2016 was quite a difficult time. I think for the entirety of the civil service machine and Number 10 it was difficult, because these red lines were being set. Often, the red lines were being set without any of the civil servants, even without the civil servants who were working very directly on Brexit policy knowing about them. The Tory Conference being the most obvious example.

UKICE: We can't blame you for 'Brexit means Brexit' or anything like that, Matt?

MO: Those lines were definitely not constructed by a civil servant.

During all of that period, there was an EU team, of which I was a member, operating at Number 10, with people who were working on the Cameron's re-negotiation. People like Matt Persson and Ivan (Rogers), who was the main person as Perm Rep.

That was replaced by a different team, which was basically an EU exit team, which was a mix of civil servants and special advisors – people like Denzil Davidson and Peter Storr. That team wasn't always in the loop on some of these big pronouncements that would happen. It was kept very close, often as close as Nick Timothy and, maybe, Chris Wilkins.

It was a very, very small circle, and these pronouncements would come out and then people like myself, but particularly Helen Bower as the official spokesperson, would have to race to write a script to explain the new line that had come out. Relations were bad. It was just not a particularly happy place, for reasons that were well-rehearsed by then.

Information did not flow particularly productively out to the rest of Number 10, let alone the rest of the machine. Phrases would come out and then an approach would have to be backfilled to explain it. That was a big part of the problem, because these phrases would emanate and some of them, 'Brexit means Brexit' being the most famous, wouldn't have been properly socialised among the officials who needed to know.

On a visit at one point, someone briefed 'red, white and blue Brexit'. It was totally ludicrous stuff. Famously at the Tory Conference in 2016, she sounded like she was going to unwind quantitative easing, and then there was a mini flash crash because traders thought Theresa May was going to order the Bank of England to unwind QE, and Brexit was part of that.

There was a whole dance about the Single Market and customs union membership throughout that Autumn. These lines would come out, where people would avoid saying we are definitely leaving the Single Market. The line would just be something like, 'It is very clear that freedom of movement has to end', which was effectively saying we can't be in the Single Market anymore.

It was at the Tory Conference in '16 that she effectively confirmed that we would leave the Single Market. I am not sure if she specifically used those words, but substantively, that was the moment.

One of the most misunderstood moments, or miscommunicated moments, was in January 2017 – the Lancaster House speech – where she very deliberately was very clear on leaving the Single Market. But she didn't say we were going

to leave the customs union, rather she said we need some form of new customs arrangement. I don't know if people had in mind something like a Turkish-style arrangement, but that deliberately left open the possibility of customs union membership.

There was this view from the May operation that they wanted to be much more traditional in how they did their communications. A previous reshuffle had been announced via Twitter, which was slightly more untraditional, and Theresa May's team, the Chiefs of Staff didn't like that. They thought that everything in the Cameron operation was very faddish. So, they decided they were going to issue press releases, but Number 10 didn't have or had stopped using very official headed press releases sometime before. People would just literally send emails with press release format to the lobby who, knowing who the Number 10 press officers were, would understand what they were getting.

We had to dig out papers with the crest and Number 10 press office at the top. Someone came over to the Cabinet Room to say, 'Liam Fox is now Secretary of State for International Trade', and I ran from the Cabinet Room back to my desk and announce both the new Secretary of State and a new Department. Then, you have created that fact on the ground, which is the Department of International Trade – a new department, with a very Eurosceptic minister. That makes it difficult to leave some wriggle room in your position around whether you are in the customs union or not.

UKICE: Did you get any questions at the time about whether the creation of that department meant that Theresa May intended to leave the customs union? Did any of the press pick up on that?

MO: I think they did, and people commented on it. I can remember (Robert) Peston or someone was talking about how there was a contradiction here. I don't think there were that many direct questions about it.

But the truth is it effectively did mean we were leaving the customs union. Other things happened, like the decision to have a separate appointee, a new substantive rep, at the World Trade Organisation. Again, not quite committing to having a completely separate trade policy and customs union exit, but giving enough of a hint that even if you were trying to leave yourself some wriggle room, you were actually also closing down your wriggle room.

UKICE: At his point, the Prime Minister gets a letter from the First Minister or Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, talking about the problems that Brexit has caused for Northern Ireland. You get people talking about the Brexit trilemma.

To what extent did the May team that you were working with appreciate these problems, particularly as they were putting forward some of these red lines on leaving the Single Market and the customs union. To what extent did they appreciate the consequences for Northern Ireland?

MO: I don't think they did really, but at this point I would have to say that I am in a sense less qualified to answer that, because the central May Team were more closed off to me than the Cameron team would have been.

I don't think either of these Prime Ministers will go down highly in the historic league tables of Prime Ministers, but one thing in Cameron's team's favour is that they were much more open with civil servants. With May's team, it may have been because they were coming in and there were lots of civil servants who had worked for Cameron who they were suspicious of, because they were quite territorial and they had had a hostile relationship – or certainly a very testy relationship – with the Cameron operation.

I can remember talking to the new director or DG at DExEU about NI in Autumn 2016. As the trilemma was becoming this thing, I had been banging on about. I had been banging on about the general problem of Northern Ireland, and then the trilemma created by leaving the customs union and Single Market.

There was the odd story about how people might think about doing something about it now, but mostly about how it is going to be a big problem. But it certainly wasn't a dominant part of the discussion. So, my recollection, simply at the time, was that people were thinking, 'We don't know what we are going to do about this, but we need to do something about it'.

In retrospect, there was no expectation among the key advisors – of which I wasn't one obviously – that the EU and Irish Government were going to make this a phase one issue.

UKICE: How easy was it to manage relations from Number 10 with other departments at the time? We have got the creation of DExEU, who think they are leading on some of this with David Davis. You have got the Foreign Office with Boris Johnson, clearly a potential rival to the Prime Minister. You have got a deteriorating relationship between Number 10 and the Treasury and Philip Hammond. Clearly, there was also a deterioration of relationships between Number 10 and Ivan Rogers, that triggered his resignation.

What was it like in Number 10 during that period?

MO: It was pretty mad. The atmosphere was not particularly good, to be honest. Lots of the senior officials in the private office did not have good relations either in the private office and certainly not in other bits of the building.

There was a change over as well. Some new civil servants came in, but in general, there weren't particularly good relationships between senior officials and the Chiefs of Staff, who were quite territorial and liked to throw their weight around. Some of it may have been performative when they came in.

I remember there was a huge fuss over Hinckley, and the approval of Hinckley Point C. That was one of the big first things that happened. That was one of Nick Timothy's particular hobby horses, as a critic of Chinese involvement in national infrastructure.

It turns out he was probably closer to the consensus now than he was then, when the UK had just come out of the 'golden relationship' era of Cameron and Osborne, who were very keen on building relationships with Beijing. Timothy was not so keen. They had a massive fight internally, from recollection, including with (Jeremy) Heywood, over how this was going to be handled. There is a question over to the extent to which that was performative, them wanting to show that they were the sheriffs in town.

I can't say the atmosphere was particularly good. Some of that for me was probably at a personal level, thinking, 'This is grim. I am having to prepare lobby scripts and brief journalists about how we are going to be really tough on X, Y and Z'. I had been a civil servant and done lots of policies I didn't agree with – I was a quiet Labour member for many of my years as a civil servant –

but this period just felt particularly difficult.

UKICE: What did you think when we finally got to Article 50, when the Prime Minister's letter mentioned the Peace Process and the British-Irish relationship. Were you at all involved in that? Did you have anything to do with that appearing?

MO: Again, in general terms, to the extent that I had any influence, it would have been less than it was in the Cameron era, purely because the Cameron people were a bit more open, and I had closer and personal relationships with the Senior Special Advisors.

Theresa May was relatively sincere, at least compared to Boris Johnson, in how she approached Northern Ireland. I remember going on the first visit with her to Stormont Castle, in Summer 2016. That was like a week or two, 10 days maybe, after she became Prime Minister. That was a year before the confidence-and-supply deal with the DUP, and Arlene Foster was not long in the job. She had only recently come in following a very successful election in Spring 2016.

So, the picture in Northern Ireland was different then than it is now. It was before the big RHI scandal had happened and Stormont had collapsed. Martin McGuinness was still in office though sadly would pass away within months. But the point I am making is that there was a sincerity there about her wanting to do the right thing, but she definitely had not made the connection between the red lines she was setting out and her theoretical commitment to Northern Ireland.

To give her her due, I think her approach was differently poised than Boris' chest beating, muscular, nationalistic unionism. With hers, there was a genuine thought that, 'We need to be respectful of nationalism and also pluralism inside Northern Ireland and unionism'. To be fair to her, to the extent that she engaged, I think she gradually got that, but at the time she definitely was not making the link.

One of my main recollections of Article 50 was of a long process around writing the Article 50 letter. Of all the 'Dear Donald' letters that have been sent, and were sent subsequently, that letter actually was relatively emollient. There

wasn't that much scrutiny about the peace process line at the time, and I don't remember much discussion about it internally, but this letter did have this line in it about security cooperation, which was interpreted as a little dig.

I remember all the discussion was literally just about the logistics. Part of the challenge on Brexit from a Comms perspective was that there are so many logistics. Quite often, you feel that you want to get involved in really iterative communications and think about how you are going to brief the media on big policy moments, when actually a lot of what the lobby want to know is, 'How did it get there?'

Well, it got there because one of the Number 10 logistics people went on the Eurostar, and had a briefcase with the letter in it. It had to be signed in wet ink. And, in a weird way, you think at the time, 'It is probably a bad sign that the many calls about the logistics and handling of getting the physical letter to Donald Tusk loom a lot larger in my mind than the Comms around the substance of the policy'. A lot of that was because you didn't see the letter until the last minute. Even people more senior than me weren't seeing it until quite late on.

UKICE: Talking of surprises, were you at all surprised that Theresa May called the election, having ruled it out, or did you think, 'Yes, let's go to the country?'

MO: Yes, very much so. That became a weird lull, because as soon as that election was called, you weren't directly going straight into Purdah, as Cameron and Osborne had been very canny about using civil service comms to roll the pitch for their political communications in the runup to the 2015 election.

That is what all Governments do by definition: ensuring that what you are communicating in office is laying the ground for what you are going to do in an election campaign to get re-elected. Cameron and Osborne were very canny about that. One of the interesting things is that the May operation couldn't do that. It hadn't bedded into Government, and it hadn't really got its feet under the table in terms of command of Whitehall.

Whitehall felt a lot more disordered, even though Theresa May herself was

very studious and across the detail of things.

UKICE: The Prime Minister didn't get the majority she expected, and she comes back as a minority Government. The Government moves very swiftly to do a deal with the Democratic Unionists. I wondered what, sitting in Number 10, you thought of that?

MO: That was dreadful. I just thought it was bad for Northern Ireland. I had nothing to do with that other than seeing people come in and chatting to the PM in private.

When they were doing the negotiations, they had to have a Private Secretary in to minute it, and then occasionally there would be more senior officials in. You had to have the relevant Number 10 Private Secretary who did Northern Ireland constitutional stuff to properly minute, who I can remember talking to. I don't think she had been long in the job either, and I don't think she was a spad. She was slightly agog at their negotiating style. But in general terms, I thought it was bad for Northern Ireland.

At this stage, part of the reason why it was clearly going to be bad for Northern Ireland is that the devolved institutions fell at the start of the year. So, the key point is understanding the interaction between the instability of the Northern Ireland institutions and the Brexit process. That linkage is still, I think, bizarrely not made enough.

The RHI scandal, which was over a badly run renewable heat scheme for which Arlene Foster was responsible Minister, led to a potential huge exposure to the block grant and massive overruns in terms of the liability to the Treasury. But Brexit was kind of the cause of the collapse. Ever since, it has been the underlay of instability, creating all these tensions and also, frankly, creating different incentives.

You are creating a world in which people are on different sides. That is part of the reason why the confidence-and-supply deal was so bad – it was in the context of the institutions being down. The UK Government was signed up to the principle of rigorous impartiality under the Good Friday Agreement. Conservatives had consistently played a slightly strange game where they had, almost slightly unconsciously at times, pushed the bounds of what that meant.

Then you got a place where you are ineffective, or near to a coalition.

Cameron had this relationship with the Ulster Unionists in the 2010 election, and they didn't win any seats under it. It would have been unthinkable under Labour.

We are a sister party. I am very proud of that Labour ethos and links. We are not the same party at all, but we are a Social Democratic and Labour Party, but we are separate. And I could still never see a Labour Government doing anything like that, certainly not post-Good Friday Agreement.

People totally misread how the DUP would react. I remember even serious people saying, 'There definitely won't be a hard border now, because the DUP won't let that happen'. What? It is also worth saying that the DUP's MPs in Westminster tend to be older people who have had pretty interesting, shall we say, experiences in the 1980s. They are the history of real hard-line politics. People like Sammy Wilson and Gregory Campbell, even Nigel Dodds, are not the DUP of the 21st Century, to the extent there was a new DUP. A lot of those slightly more pragmatic people were in Stormont, and some of the older hard-line people had been decamped to Westminster. That created a situation where people like Sammy, and of course (Ian) Paisley Jr, were in the mix.

UKICE: I don't know whether the confidence-and-supply agreement was the straw that broke the camel's back, but when you finally left Downing Street in October 2017, did you think then that Northern Ireland was emerging as a major issue?

MO: I think, technically, I left in September 2017. In the run-up to the election campaign, Article 50 was triggered and then we spend nearly a tenth of our entire negotiating time having an election, and we still haven't got our negotiating mandate settled or agreed.

There was a load of position papers done, sort of Ollie (Robbins) and his people at DExEU getting these position papers read on a whole range of things. That was the work of Summer 2017. Slightly bizarrely, the first negotiating round was in the week after the election. That, obviously, created a particularly odd, and for the UK, a particularly damaging precedent, in that they went in whilst in a position of obvious political weakness, because they had just

sought a mandate for a version of Brexit and lost lots of seats.

There is the famous photograph of David Davis with no paperwork, which was not particularly fair, to be honest. I usually would not defend David Davis, but he got criticised for lots of things and I am not sure that was a fair one.

That was a period of producing position papers, and one of the position papers was on Ireland and Northern Ireland. That came out in August 2017, and that was one of the last things I was involved in.

I can't remember when the sufficient progress test was actually socialised. I presume the Council just decreed it. But in August 2017, a position paper was produced which was the closest, the most detailed UK acknowledgement of the issues that were going to have to be discussed, including the single electricity market. Basically, it said, 'We will need really specific arrangements on SPS and the single electricity market'.

Now what it didn't do was say, 'Northern Ireland needs to be in a Single Market for goods or electricity regulation', although when it comes to the single electricity market, you are acknowledging pretty much that Northern Ireland needs to be in the single market in terms of any directives to do with electricity or energy.

But that acknowledged what the issues were, I think, for the first time in substance. It didn't really offer any really specific solutions, but it opened the door to those issues from the UK perspective. Then there was a customs paper, which is when max-fac (maximum facilitation) and the new customs partnership first arrived.

I remember there was a huge discussion, lots of back and forth inside Cabinet, between Hammond and Davis about whether max-fac would be in there. There was an acknowledgement that Northern Ireland, whatever arrangement, had to be contingent on ensuring a soft border on the island of Ireland. I would say those two things, though they did not in any way concede the extent of what was the backstop, became the protocol. Whereas if you look at the Lancaster House speech, a lot of that was talking about no return to the borders of the past, which was just deliberately vague.

Really, at that time, the UK hadn't really got its lines together on any of this stuff. When it finally got its lines together it was effectively acknowledging what the key issues were that needed to be resolved. The EU was already much further advanced in saying, 'This will effectively mean that there needs to be specific areas of alignment in Northern Ireland within the single market. In terms of customs, if the UK is going to break off, Northern Ireland will need some form of different customs arrangement'.

I think the EU had got further down the line in term of its thinking on that. People in London surely were thinking those things or were aware that Brussels was thinking those things. Frankly, in the months after the election, even though the DUP were in the confidence-and-supply deal, there was probably a bit more space for officials to get into the detail and say, 'These are the things we need to engage on'.

The UK Government's Brexit deals

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): When you decided to leave Downing Street, was that already with a view to moving into politics in Northern Ireland?

Matthew O'Toole (MO): No, definitely not. It is important to say that I think my party is a very moderate nationalist party, or a more moderate nationalist party, but we are also a centre left party. So, if you were planning to get into being a left-leaning social democratic constitutional Irish nationalist politician, spending years of your career working in a Conservative Number 10 it is not, necessarily, a thing you would do. One doesn't necessarily easily lead on to the other.

I started my career as a journalist before I became a civil servant, mostly writing for House Magazine, Civil Service World, and then I spent nearly a decade in the Civil Service after that. But I wanted to write about Ireland and Brexit. I very much felt, and I still do feel, more of a call to write about it and try and explain it to people, as much as being a political actor.

So I wanted to write editorials and articles about it, and I didn't feel I could continue in Number 10. I suppose from a narrow career perspective it was a bad move. My next job was a Director of News, Head of News in the senior civil service, Head of News at Trade – those were the jobs I was being tapped

up for.

I was expected to be leading a Comms team somewhere in Whitehall, and that should have been the next job. I thought, 'Well I can't continue working on Brexit at Number 10 because I feel so strongly about it', but at the same time I felt so passionately about it, that did I really want to be running Comms in some other Whitehall Department?

I suppose I had a decision to make. I was able to get a job through a connection in a consultancy firm, basically a City consultancy which mostly does financial PR, but they wanted someone who could do politics. In lots of these places, if you worked at Number 10 you were employable in that regard. They were very flexible about me. Truthfully, because they didn't have a big public affairs lobbying operation, I didn't have to mind my Ps&Qs with the new Number 10 operation. If I had gone to work for a more established public affairs shop, I would have to be much more in touch with my former colleagues. Because I was able to leave and go and work for them, I had much more flexibility and I could write increasingly angry op-eds and Tweet and be controversial.

UKICE: On the side-lines as a commentator, you saw Theresa May go through her travails of 2017 and 2018. We saw Chequers, her finally concluding the Withdrawal Agreement including her version of the Northern Ireland backstop. What did you make of that deal? Did it have the makings of a decent way forward?

MO: I think by the end she did get it. One thing I would say in retrospect is that a lot of the discourse was around a second referendum versus Theresa May's deal versus this, unknown, ERG other. In an alternative universe, where lots of the people whose sympathy would have been with the second referendum were then presented with the choice between Theresa May's deal and what came afterwards, they might have been more fulsomely pro Theresa May's deal.

I was obviously in touch with some of my former colleagues and I think they had serious people who had counselled her to that. By the end, there really wasn't an acceptable solution that didn't involve GB sacrificing a significant degree of its ability to diverge. There is no Brexit choice which doesn't disrupt

Northern Ireland, other than high alignment between Britain and the European Union.

That goes right back to this core, from my view, philosophical, and even moral quandary – the belief that the whole peace project thing doesn't mean anything to the UK, because they didn't experience two World Wars and the 100 Years War. They hadn't had non-stop war in Europe and conflict between peoples that meant that they instinctively got the peace project component of having a Single Market.

And I found it so sad that people hadn't got that that was fundamentally the moral and intellectual case. It wasn't just about Britain's strategic position. I am sure that maximising the strategic voice in both Brussels and Washington and playing off both the Elysée and Chancellery is important. But, fundamentally, the peace project on the island of Ireland and between Britain and Ireland was intrinsically linked to European Union membership.

And one of the great tragedies is it was never understood. Implicitly, that is what Theresa May got in the end. It didn't mean European Union membership, but she got that it involved Britain's relationship with Ireland and therefore Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is inseparable from Britain's relationship with Ireland, so it required high-alignment and it required her version of the backstop.

Relative to what has happened since, it is highly regrettable that her deal wasn't ratified.

UKICE: The DUP had obviously supported Brexit in the referendum. Were you surprised that they didn't vote for May's deal?

MO: It is hard to say, actually, on that one. I don't know if in retrospect I would say I was. I think a couple of things were happening there. One, the DUP are hugely culpable for a lot of what has happened in relation to the protocol and the backstop, and have been immensely, successively inept and arrogant. There is no other way of putting it. I am afraid any sympathy for them, as opposed to sympathy for ordinary Unionists or people who voted for them, has to be heavily caveated and qualified by the seriousness of what they have brought upon themselves.

I think it was a mix of two things. I think it was one, the learned DUP approach to negotiating, which is to hold your breath and stamp your feet until you absolutely have to. The final version of the backstop, basically, was the UK just indefinitely being aligned to the European Union.

But because there was still a theoretical difference there between Northern Ireland and GB, that was one reason why they said, 'No, we don't want that all'. They believed that if they held out, they might get something more favourable.

Holding out on that was one part of it, but then the other part of it was that a significant contingent of them were heavily influenced by the ERG and British Nationalism. The world of chest beating, Euroscepticism, 'F*** them, we are not going to take it', is the political world that people like Sammy Wilson and Ian Paisley come from.

The DUP only tend to do a deal, or historically tend to do a deal whenever they deem it to be in their absolute interests. And in this situation, I suppose they would have felt, 'Why do we have to?' That turned out to be a huge miscalculation. I also think there are a few of their more hard-line people who had drunk the Kool-Aid. Paisley went to the Leave EU rallies in Parliament Square and ranted and raved. They were properly brought in to all that stuff. Within the DUP Parliamentary Group, there was a Vote Leave-Leave.EU split. The Vote Leave ones were probably Geoffrey and Nigel Dodds, thinking that they can hold out and get a better deal, and then the Leave.EU lot – Sammy and Ian Paisley – thought, 'This is where we are'.

UKICE: The SDLP weren't in that Parliament because they hadn't got any Westminster seats in the 2017 election. But, as a thought experiment, if you had been advising SDLP MPs on what to do in the votes on Theresa May's deal, would you have told them to back it or not?

MO: That is a really good question. So, previously, there were three SDLP MPs in Westminster, including for this constituency. The reason I am here is that one of the DUP MPs lost her seat in the December 2019 election. My predecessor won this seat and therefore couldn't sit in the Assembly anymore.

It is impossible to answer the question without the knowledge of now. I think,

knowing what I know now, certainly, yes. I think it would be hard to say that you would prefer this as opposed to the Theresa May deal. I can't say, definitively, that it would have been that straightforward at the time. That's bearing in mind that, I would say, we have some claim to be the most pro-European party operating in the UK Parliament because of the Hume legacy. We are very strongly pro-European. A large part of that is the whole learned thing of the European context being critical to peace in Ireland and peace between Britain and Ireland.

One of the reasons people voted for us was the live prospect of a second referendum and the whole of the UK staying in the European Union. So, it wouldn't necessarily have been a straightforward decision with that still in the ether. I have been called a huge protocol defender in Northern Ireland media and have constantly have to defend Theresa May's deal. It is much better than the current protocol. It would have been much better for this place – and for the whole of the UK, for that matter – than the protocol.

UKICE: So, if we come on to the protocol itself, were you surprised that Boris Johnson and David Frost did that deal on the basis of the Northern Ireland protocol, a front stop, cementing in a future trading relationship that required Northern Ireland to stay long-term aligned to EU rules on goods and under the supervision of the European Court of Justice?

MO: Boris Johnson was not known as someone with deep and abiding principles, so it shouldn't have been surprising in that sense. It is also worth saying that whenever Boris came in, they set a tone of basically being profoundly sceptical of the entire thing.

There is always an open question of the extent to which Boris has engaged with any of the stuff on Ireland at a serious, substantive, intellectual level, but certainly Frost and others around him definitely did not accept the precursor argument. I have heard people who have had conversations with David Frost, along the lines that he is not someone who necessarily accepts the premise that a new land border in some form is unacceptable. I think he is more ambiguous, shall we say, at best, on that point than even some in May's team were.

The fundamental thing that stopped the May deal getting through was the

question of the Irish border. They were not accepting the basic premise that there needed not to be a land border of some kind on the island of Ireland. It's not necessarily that they were saying, 'You can just stick up a customs post' but they just weren't accepting of that. Obviously, some of that was Dom Cummings being very iconoclastic and fighting the EU. Some of that is also, clearly, Frost himself.

Some of the stuff they put out in summer 2018 and then early on 2019, including the final 'Dear Donald' letter of the many from Boris to Donald Tusk, was effectively rowing back on quite a lot of things. But they were also calling for lots of other things which are, in a sense, now going to be quoted back, like an All-Ireland Regulatory Zone.

Effectively, lots of the things he called for effectively implied that the Republic would have to leave the Single Market, or parts of it. They were doing so in quite a bullish, hard-line way, but one of their key points was the democratic consent mechanism., which is a vote in the Assembly every four years. From my perspective, Democratic Consent as a device will inevitably now lead to destabilisation in the Northern Ireland institutions, particularly when it comes to the vote, albeit we may be in a slightly more stable position in 2024.

So, in a sense, I wasn't surprised, though I was possibly shocked at how hard the lines were whenever they came in. I think what happened was in Autumn, about this time two years ago, Johnson effectively just side-lined David Frost and said, 'I am going to do a deal with Varadkar now', and that was the deal that was done. That was the backstop without any obligation for GB alignment, a front stop but with a couple of other lines being removed and the insertion of this thing about the Democratic Consent mechanism.

All it served to do was to make the border in the sea harder and make the whole thing more unstable. So, both of those things have played out and, of course, they disowned the deal afterwards. So, looking at it in the round is all very disorienting, because they came in with very hard lines, which they later abandoned.

The future of Brexit and Northern Ireland

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Are you surprised at how the debates on

the protocol have played out? Looking at situations like the EU's position on vaccines: did you expect it to be a source of ongoing tension, as it was implemented?

Matthew O'Toole (MO): When you factor everything in the Brexit context, UK-EU relations, Irish history and particularly history in this part of Ireland, the political grammar and the political psychology of Northern Ireland and the baggage with Unionism and Nationalism and everything in-between, it was inevitable that there were going to be some questions asked. I have been surprised at the vociferousness of it. Bearing in mind that last year, DUP politicians were talking about this as, in Arlene Foster's words, a gateway of opportunity with a foot in both markets. They were trying to sell it.

Part of the problem is that London didn't help them sell it. London tried a different tack. The moment with the vaccine fiasco and EU nearly triggering Article 16 was bad, and that was a serious EU misstep, because it allowed London and lots of Unionists politicians to have a moment of righteous anger on the EU's part. And things really spiralled from there.

The problem is the UK's reaction to it was wholly unconstructive and very, very disproportionate. In operational terms, they have done things like extended grace periods unilaterally. We would have a theoretical problem with grace periods being extended unilaterally without EU agreement and discussion, and there were lots of issues where the UK simply hasn't given the EU access to certain databases or basic information that would have helped smooth the whole thing.

There have been so many problems in the way it has been handled. The protocol is demonstrably imperfect, not ideal. It had to be implemented at the very last minute, without extension to the transition period. The TCA was only signed days before, and in the middle of a pandemic you could not ask for a worst moment to land this thing. But there was no attempt to land it: it was a bit like a pilot putting their hand up as you are coming into the runway and saying, 'Well this is shit, isn't it? Well, I'm sure it can land itself', as the passengers scream and wail.

But the process throughout the entire year has just been one of London talking up discontent. There is also this bizarre thing that happens where certain DUP

politicians will deny that the Protocol is to do with Brexit. You will hear DUP politicians say, 'The Protocol has nothing to do with Brexit', which is the most extraordinary thing. It is hard not to fear for logic and the English language.

But you also have this challenge, which is because the biggest party in Unionism – the DUP – was largely responsible or very heavily implicated in the Brexit process until late 2019, they first of all tentatively tried to defend and sell the protocol. Now, they have realised they have got a huge electoral vulnerability over it. Effectively, they have had to defer to the logic of the most extreme parts of Unionism. But the truth is, the most extreme bits of Unionism are in no way representative of most Unionists.

It is really important to say during the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the mid-1980s and, indeed, during the protests of the 1990s, whenever Unionists were properly annoyed, they got tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of people out on to the street, of all classes. There have been hundreds, sometimes just tens of people on the street protesting the protocol. It is genuinely a fabrication that there is mass unrest and discontent over the protocol.

There were some riots in Loyalist areas around Easter time on which the Protocol was kind of part of the contributing climate. But certainly, the main thing was about the police and them not prosecuting anybody over a Republican funeral, a very niche Northern Ireland issue. But the UK has sought to say, 'Look, look Brussels, look at these'.

You have loyalist-linked people or loyalist paramilitary-linked people talking up violence and talking up the threat of violence. It is constantly being talked up and alluded to. That has become the logic of the UK position and it is very, very concerning. In no way has the EU been blameless in terms of how they have landed this stuff, and I would never claim that. But there is not a straightforward, 'both sides are as bad as each other' explanation. I am afraid that is my strong view- both sides have not been as bad as each other.

The EU have made mistakes and have been at times clumsy in how they have handled it. But compared to what the UK has done, I am afraid it has not been equivalent.

UKICE: If we look back over this entire period – and you are seeing it from your multiple perspectives as civil servant, outsider and then Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly – what do you now think about Whitehall’s general appreciation of the complexity of Northern Ireland throughout the Brexit process?

MO: I think if you look at 1998, and then in many ways the years after, the Good Friday Agreement is one of the UK’s great achievements. You can talk about how the UK state handled Northern Ireland for a very long period, from partition onwards if you want to get into the long history of Britain’s role in Ireland. But if we think of it in modern terms, the Good Friday Agreement was an achievement after a very dark period in which the British state was, at times, implicated and not necessarily in good ways.

The political achievement of the Good Friday Agreement and sustaining that was a very complicated trick, and a quite subtle one, of Northern Ireland being in the UK, and in a sense, consent growing for Northern Ireland’s place in the UK being more tacitly given, but demonstrably more present. At the same time, people who aspire to there not being a border in Ireland, and Northern Ireland not even being in the UK – which is obviously a tradition that my party comes from – were managed, and that became a less sharp and immediate question than pursuing reconciliation, than trying to find common ground among people who take different views in the Constitution.

I think part of the challenge has been that, in my view, the Good Friday Agreement created Northern Ireland’s position, and put an asterisk next to Northern Ireland’s position in the UK, that enabled consent for Northern Ireland being in the UK to be more freely, if tacitly, given.

What has become clear in the last few years is that large parts of even quite liberal Unionism, but also the Conservative Party, and even at times bits of Whitehall, had not quite realised that that asterisk existed. People don’t like it being pointed out. I can understand why very purist Unionists don’t like it being pointed out, but by definition there is an asterisk next to British Sovereignty in Northern Ireland. That is an uncomfortable thing for lots of Unionists to hear, but for them to properly assess the position they are in and understand why Brexit has been so difficult and devastating, they need to understand what that asterisk means and how that changed.

The asterisk was basically signifying that Northern Ireland is in the United Kingdom, but it has a unique relationship with the rest of Ireland. Its citizens have Irish citizenship by birth, should they choose to exercise it. It has a permanent right to secede, established in treaty, which is much more explicit than Scotland's. All of that meant, in a sense, putting the big 'Exit' sign above the door and acknowledging that you were there on a particular basis, with parity of esteem for the Nationalists' traditions.

All those things do, I am afraid, put an asterisk next to Northern Ireland's position in the UK. And for me, that asterisk was best managed, and accommodated, in the context of European Union membership. European Union membership allowed lots of people in the UK state and lots of British politicians not to realise that it was there. But now their attention has been drawn to it.

One other thing that has changed since 1998 is that, in 1998, the SNP had a few MPs and there was no real, meaningful prospect of a referendum. No one would have predicted in 1998 that within 16 years a referendum on Scottish independence would long pre-date a referendum on Irish unity.

I don't think anyone would have predicted that in 1998, but that now means that the UK state that signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 is now fundamentally different. In part, that is because its existence on other frontiers is at risk. So therefore, the basis on which it signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 is more problematic for both the state, but also the political class. I think that interaction isn't always understood, but nor is the European context.

UKICE: How significant do you think it was that neither the Northern Ireland Executive was up and running, nor was there a more balanced representation in Parliament with Sinn Féin absenteeism and no SDLP or Alliance MPs during the critical periods for the early phases of Brexit, during the 2017-2019 Parliament? Did that make a difference?

MO: Yes, I think it would have done. If you think about it, if you had a very close, finely balanced Parliament, then small groups of MPs do become more relevant. Caroline Lucas had a very big profile in that period, obviously the DUP MPs certainly did. There was constant, fairly preposterous debate, from

my perspective, about whether Sinn Féin would take their seats, but it was never going to happen in a million years.

There were Liberal Londoners who thought, 'Maybe if Sinn Féin takes their seats, it will be a great progressive, pro-European party'. Anyone who knows history will tell you that Sinn Féin are not a pro-European party. Anyway, but I digress.

As I say, small groups of MPs, Northern Irish MPs, have not historically been hugely listened to in Parliament, unless there is a finely balanced and finely hung Parliament. Obviously, Gerry Fitt and Frank Maguire during the Labour minority Government of the 1970s were critical.

It is also important to say that in the post-referendum period, there were SDLP MPs – there wasn't an Alliance MP – but MPs like Sylvia Hermon, to her great credit, were there and represented people who voted Remain. She was the only pro-Remain Northern Ireland MP who took her seat.

From 2016 to 2017, Mark Durkan, who was an SDLP MP in Foyle, managed to secure from David Davis quite an important on-the-record concession about the EU citizenship of people in Northern Ireland who choose to acknowledge their Irish citizenship, and he also acknowledged that that bit of the United Kingdom had a permanent right to re-join the European Union. That was really important.

That is the kind of thing that, I would like to think, SDLP MPs would have been able to get done in that period, because we knew the detail more. Mark (Durkan) got David Davis, he collared him on it in exiting the EU Select Committee and then subsequently it was put in a letter which said, 'The UK Government acknowledges that Northern Ireland has the right to re-join the EU'.

That was quite a big moment, to be honest. It is the logical outworking of the Good Friday Agreement commitment to respecting the position of people in Northern Ireland to vote for a united Ireland. The hard truth is that lots of London-based journalists had to learn about Northern Ireland relatively quickly, but too many of them started from a low base not just of information, but of interest. I don't say that in a sour way, it is an observable fact.

UKICE: How do you see Brexit playing out on politics in Northern Ireland in the longer run?

MO: It fundamentally depends on what the UK's relationship with the EU is. My hope, obviously, is that there is a resolution to the current impasse over the protocol and that the UK Government agrees to implement the EU's proposals and, yes, is absolutely engaged on it. One area where I would like to see more from the EU and more from the UK is around the representation of Northern Ireland.

What are the structures of MLAs – and it's not just that I am looking for free trips to Brussels – and the Northern Ireland Executive engaging with the European Parliament, with the Commission? I really want us to maximise that duality and I hope enough of the Unionists theoretically could get to be relaxed about that. But that does require a UK-EU relationship that is not permanently cantankerous and difficult, and we don't seem to be close to there in the short to medium term.

The fact that there is a French election coming up, I wouldn't say is a particularly strong leading indicator for UK-EU relations, for obvious reasons, but I would hope on that. In the bigger sense, not to labour on the constitutional point, but I think it is inevitably true that there are a lot of people who think that united Ireland is round the corner. There are no guarantees that there will be a united Ireland, but I think it is now much more likely than it was that there will be a border poll within the years to come.

I wouldn't want to put a date on it, because I don't think it is constructive or helpful for our society, or for the actual argument. But I think it is highly debatable as to whether that would have been happening without Brexit. I think it is, frankly, an unavoidable argument that Brexit has made that question sharper and more likely to be asked and then, possibly, answered in a particular way. So, the outcome on that is far from certain.

If an alien came down from space and was examining Northern Ireland – leaving aside my views and my preference – I think a fair-minded alien, perhaps with a degree in political science, might say, 'What is the fundamental Northern Ireland dilemma? Leaving aside history and identity and all those things'. It might say, 'It doesn't really make sense for a small island, where

people are fairly integrated in lots of other ways, socially and economically, to have an international border’.

But they might also say, ‘Well, if there is a big, rich country that gives you fiscal transfer, it doesn’t make sense to leave that big, rich country’. Those are two arguments that are in tension. The problem with Brexit, for the Unionists’ case, is that it has strengthened Unionism’s weak point, which is that it doesn’t make sense to have an international border on a small island. But it has also weakened Unionists’ strong point, which is that Britain was a relatively strong, relatively rich country.

People from broad Nationalism, who frankly were not really thinking about an immediate border poll or a border poll any time soon, are now thinking about the prospect of constitutional change, in a way that they were not in the past. That is an unavoidable fact, and I am afraid it is a tough one for the DUP to confront, but it is true.

I am not someone who is clearly illogical about these things and thinks it is inevitable, because it isn’t. If you want change, it will involve a lot of work and a lot of creativity and it will be very complicated and very difficult because of our history. But I think it is unarguably more on the agenda than it was before, and unarguably the calculus is different for people than it was before – whether you agree with it or disagree with it.