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Euroscepticism

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Have you always considered yourself to be a Eurosceptic, and where did your Euroscepticism come from?

Claire Fox (CF): Yes, but I don't think I've probably ever used that phrase, 'Eurosceptic'. I was critical of the EU, very much so. I can't remember not being, so it's difficult to put a date on it. But it was part of a tradition that I was part of, on the left, which was to be critical of an unelected unaccountable body as a threat to popular sovereignty. So very much in the left, Tony Benn and Peter Shore type tradition. I'd seen it in that way. Obviously, in the build up to what became the referendum, some of the actions of the EU, which had become much clearer in everyday political discussion, confirmed that.

UKICE: Obviously, the left moved on Europe. Did it then sort of surprise, or indeed, concern you that what became known as Euroscepticism was associated with people who were seen to hold a relatively right-wing set of views?

CF: Well, there was a silly version of Euroscepticism that haunted the Tory Party for many years. It was very difficult to meet an active Conservative who wasn't Eurosceptic and who didn't make snipey comments about the EU. But I considered that to be a pretty shallow affair.

The rise of UKIP surprised me, like everyone else, because you realised that

there were popular and populist concerns around Europe and the EU, and that was expressed in UKIP. So a lot of people were quite sneering about UKIP, and I certainly didn't have any enthusiasm for them, but I thought it was an interesting political phenomenon.

The weird thing about the left was that, before the referendum was called, there was increasing agitation amongst well-known left-wing figures against the EU. You had well-known commentators like Paul Mason and Owen Jones speaking out against the EU, largely because of what had happened with Greece. Greece was a big, pivotal turning point. It was felt that they were punitively dealt with, in terms of the Eurozone. But there had also been the infamous ways that the EU had said, 'You've had a referendum in Ireland, but you got it wrong. Go back and vote again.' Because I'm from an Irish background, that had struck me very distinctly.

We also have to remember that one of the people who was most outspoken on the Irish referendum at that time was, of all people, Jeremy Corbyn. He was magnificent, in fact, in some of the things he said about democracy at that time.

So, to answer your question, before the referendum was called there was no reason to imagine that it wasn't going to have been a 'beyond left and right' question. I didn't wander around, thinking, 'It's associated just with the right.' There was a kind of silly Euroscepticism, in my view, on the Tory side, but there were some very serious figures who were arguing that this had gone too far now. So I was amongst not friends, but people I recognised on the left.

UKICE: Is your Euroscepticism connected to a broader scepticism about political elites, or is it part of the same thing?

CF: No. It was entirely to do with the democratic question – that's what it was derived from – which was the dangers it posed to democratic national sovereignty. I suppose I'd felt very strongly, for some time, that the best way for democracy to be seriously popular and accountable to its voters was through the nation state. So it's not that I'm a nationalist, but the geographical nation state was the best way we'd arrived at of holding people accountable at the ballot box. So that was where I was.

UKICE: Was there ever a vision of reforms that would make you regard the EU as a good thing, or was reform always out of the question?

CF: I didn't think the EU was reformable, but I have no principled objection to an accountable federal gathering of states. I just thought it would require something like America, like a civil war, to get it.

You have to have a population that relates to and sees the legitimacy of a body that you vote for. In other words, you need to go down a full European federalist route, you have to forge a demos for that Europe. I thought it was pretty impossible for that to happen. I thought it would be incredibly difficult, and I thought that the EU had imposed that vision, without creating the demos, other than to keep having initiatives that they paid lots of money for where they said, 'Let's talk to people about being a European demos.' But that didn't have any meaning. It didn't have any content, beyond spin. So that was where I was at.

The UK itself, if you want, is a forging of a federalist union. At the moment, we're seeing the strains on that. But there are different parts to it, forged into the equivalent of a nation state. So it's not to be pernicky about saying, 'It has to be a geographical entity'. It's just that the geographical entity has to politically forge a demos to which it is accountable. The EU didn't do that. So I didn't think that it was reformable.

It wasn't a question of, 'Can't you give a bit more power to the European Parliament?' because actually, the European Parliament was always a second chamber. It was always there as a democratic sticking plaster on an undemocratic body. The setting up of the EU, when you read back historically, always seemed to me to be a counter to democracy. It was always seen to be a way of ensuring that the democratic mandate didn't make mistakes. So there was always going to be a body that could counter when the voters were wrong.

It was partly because its argument was, 'Look what happens when you leave nation states to get on with it on their own: you end up with wars and fascism, and so on.' But that was an anti-democratic argument, in my opinion, because it didn't trust democracy to deliver the correct answer. So it set up something else that said, 'Well, we'll have a load of experts who can do it instead.'

The referendum

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): Did you campaign in the referendum?

Claire Fox (CF): Yes, but I didn't join any of the groups. I spoke, I think, at practically all of the different designated groups. I spoke at practically all of their events. What I mean is, when I was asked to speak, whoever asked me, I spoke. There was a lot of informal groups that set up in places like Wakefield, Leeds, Liverpool, or Merseyside, and I was asked to speak. I also spoke at a lot of student organised events. And I, obviously, was lucky that I had a media platform, so I made it clear, on that media platform, that I was supporting Leave.

So when the referendum was called I thought, 'Good. It's a good chance.' I was completely cynical about why Cameron had called it. I knew this was an internal Tory Party spat. I knew why he'd called it. But I was like, 'Good. We get a chance, at last.'

But in that early stage, there was very little public acknowledgement of the significance of it. So it might have been exciting for UKIP and the traditional Eurosceptic groups, but it wasn't really catching the imagination. Now, we'd had a referendum around the Alternative vote. If you remember. The reason I say, 'If you remember' is because it's hard to remember, it just came and went without making an impact on the consciousness of anyone. So I was at an event with some Westminster think-tank type people, who were largely Remain, who had basically said, 'The problem is, no one is going to vote in this referendum,' which, at that stage, seemed true to me. It hadn't captured any imagination at all.

Then it was said, 'What we need to do is to tell people that this is the most important vote that they'll ever have in their lives, and it's the only time that their vote will count.' Well, they did that, and that captured the imagination. Suddenly, everywhere you went, people who weren't political started to say – hairdressers, at the school gates, in the pub – 'What do you reckon on this referendum, then? What are you going to do?' So I realised that it was picking up popular steam.

Once it started picking up popular steam, the Remain arguments lost any

positive element, and started to attack those people who were considering leaving. The more that happened, the more it irritated ordinary people, who'd been told that they were given this one-off, unique, historic opportunity to decide a constitutional question. They were being trusted.

At the same time, in parallel, there was a group of people who seemed to be pretty establishment figures saying, 'Well, we don't trust you, because you're all racist,' or, 'You don't understand it,' or, "You're xenophobic, and you're all Little Englanders." This is the irony of the whole historic question. That galvanised a popular reaction, where people felt, 'Well, actually, that's not true. I'm taking the whole thing very seriously, thank you very much. I'm researching it. I'm thinking about it.' So it changed the dynamic.

I can't remember when that was. It was almost quite close to when the referendum happened. But it turned from being this rather geeky, if-you're-involved-in-politics referendum, to a national referendum in which the ordinary voters – millions and millions of them – realised that something was at stake, and they were being trusted, and they took it seriously.

The reason I'm saying that is because that is almost what happened to me. I was pleased there was a referendum. I wasn't overly galvanised by it. I spoke at a few rallies. It wasn't the most important thing in my life. But the more that the attacks came in, saying that, 'This referendum should never be happening,' that the voters couldn't be trusted with it, that it was going to lead to doom and gloom, that it was associated with the far right and racism, the more I became radicalised, and started thinking, 'This is so unfair and not on.' So I started to speak out more clearly.

UKICE: Did you think it mattered, in the Brexit campaign, to have a view of what leaving the EU would look like – so the terms of a future relationship – or did you just think this was the key moment to get out, and that was to be settled later?

CF: I think I was of the latter opinion, but it's not to suggest that one hadn't considered some of the issues. I suppose I didn't see it as majorly about future trade relations. That was the dominant discussion about what would happen later. That was from the Remain side. So a lot of the questions that we now are preoccupied about, in terms of our relationship with the EU, were dominated by

a discussion about whether trade would happen or not. Both sides concentrated on that.

You've got to think what the arguments were that you were posed with. There was also the argument that, if we left the EU, nobody would ever be able to travel. Young people would be stuck in the UK, and never allowed to travel, and they wouldn't have roaming points, if you remember those fascinating discussions.

So I was, I suppose, much more reacting to fire-fighting against the arguments put to me. I'm not a policy wonk, anyway, so I was never going to be developing the policies. But I went to lots of discussions, and to be honest with you in the public arena – and I mean from politicians – those discussions were not happening, and I mean on both sides. That detail was not occurring.

People will now say, 'We always knew about the Irish question.' One or two people might have said it, but it didn't come up in any single discussion I went to. By the way, remember, in those days I was respectable. So I was going to and being invited to speak at events that were 90% Remainers. I spoke at events that had nothing to do with Brexit, where you'd go in and everyone would joke.

I went to a literary event – I remember this really well – and they said, 'It's good to have you here. It's good to be amongst friends.' The Chair said, in opening, 'Does anyone here know anyone who's going to vote Leave?' and everybody laughed. I said, 'Me,' and they laughed, because they thought I was joking. It was like, 'You can't be at a literary event in Waterstones and be a Leaver.'

Afterwards, three or four people sidled up to me, from a meeting of several hundred, and said, 'I'm voting Leave, too, but don't tell anyone.' So the atmosphere had already set in. The reason I'm saying that is because the arguments that were happening in Remain circles – events I went to at the LSE, events I went to in universities – the Remain arguments were not about the settlement afterwards. It was, basically, to say, 'If we vote to leave, we will be xenophobic, Little Englanders, stepping back into the 1950s, full of racists. We'll have accommodated to the most backward elements. There will be mass unemployment, and all the companies will leave.'

So there wasn't a detailed discussion about the arrangements, in terms of any relationship with the EU. It was much more *ad hominem*, straw men type arguments. So I responded to those things.

UKICE: Did you have reservations about any elements of the Vote Leave campaign or Leave.EU, or any of the tactics they employed? Do you think they were good campaigns?

CF: Yes, I had major reservations about lots of the campaigns, to be honest. The arguments around immigration were, obviously, nerve-racking. I'm much more liberal on immigration than a lot of people were in the campaign. We're all familiar with the famous poster, which was disgraceful, which I said at the time, and continue to say. It was whipping up tensions. But the bit that one should recognise is that I ended up going round talking to people who were then considering voting Leave, and we did not discuss immigration. So immigration was a lightning rod for something.

When I say, 'Immigration,' it wasn't immigration, actually. There might have been a minority of people for whom it was a broad immigration question. It was about being told that you could not discuss freedom of movement, because it was beyond your democratic power. You couldn't stop it.

So a good example: I went to an off-the-record discussion on immigration. Invited guests only – experts. God knows what I was doing there. Anyway, I was there. The discussion was that there was an anti-immigration atmosphere happening, and what we could do about it – all good, liberal, anti-racists that we were. I said that the problem was that a lot of people were concerned about freedom of movement, because it was an imposition. So it wasn't about immigration, in the traditional sense.

They said, 'We're not talking about that at tonight's meeting, because that's not going to change. That's a given, because we're in the EU.' I said, 'That's the problem: you've, basically, cut off, from democratic discussion or debate, the thing which is upsetting people. So if you do that, you don't resolve the problem; you exacerbate it.' But when I went round and talked to people, that didn't come up.

So you were asking me, were there things I didn't like? Obviously, I knew that

that immigration was a nerve-racking thing. Your earlier question now kicks in, which was that I was aware of the fact that the left had scarpered, in their thousands, from any Euroscepticism they'd previously embraced. So I found myself in a situation whereby there wasn't a very active left campaigning to leave the EU. So the likes of Owen Jones, Paul Mason and Jeremy Corbyn and so on were suddenly absent from the field. So one felt slightly exposed in relation to that. That was sort of uncomfortable.

I thought that the Vote Leave campaign were, potentially, overly technocratic. It has to be said that I say this now, and it's all kind of amusing, isn't it? This wacko guy, Dominic Cummings, who I knew vaguely from the education world, suddenly seemed to be talking about algorithms the whole time. It was all data-driven on a couple of things that I went to, and I hated all that stuff, because I thought you had to go out and win the argument. I'm a bit old fashioned on that front.

I'd be at meetings where people would say, 'It'll be great if there's a low turnout, because that'll be good for us.' I'd say, 'No, it would be bad for us, because it's a democratic question, and you want maximum turnout.'

'It will be bad if lots of young people vote,' they'd say, 'Because that might lead to skewing the vote towards staying in.' I said, 'No, it would be disastrous for us if young people don't vote in this, because we want them to vote. We need to convince them.'

So, yes, I had reservations, which was why I didn't join any of the campaigns. But on the other hand, the other thing that I really think was interesting the speed with which local groups set up. It was out of nowhere. It reminded me of the miners' strike – I've said this before – with miners' wives, who had gone from doing nothing, then suddenly you'd find Mrs Smith, in Sunderland, had set up a Leave group, not officially designated by anyone, and they were getting 30 people every week going out canvassing. I'd be like, 'This is fabulous. This is a democratic flowering.' That happened outside of the control of the official groups, and that was the thing I was most interested in and inspired by.

UKICE: You didn't join the campaigns. Did you coordinate with, work with, or be in regular touch with the campaigns?

CF: No, hardly. I think they thought I was mad, all of them, and they knew I wouldn't toe the line. So I would get phoned by everybody, with, 'Have you heard what they're doing?' There was a bit of gossip going on, but no, I kept out of it, as much as possible. But like I say, we were the Academy of Ideas, and I was doing it as an individual.

By the way, just like every other organisation, the Academy of Ideas, at that time, was split. I think we had about 10 or 11 staff members. I was a Director, closely associated with the founder and all the rest of it. And the team was split. It was half and half. We didn't have a position. Half of the staff were actively Remain, and the other half were Leave. Like the rest of the country.

So I was conscious of the fact that I was trying to do it as an individual. We organised one big debate, in which we had David Davis and Bruno Waterfield on one side, and Vicky Pryce and Simon Nixon. We had 400 people, completely split down the middle. We filmed that.

At the Battle of Ideas, in the two years building up to the referendum, we had known that Europe was a big issue. We had the battle over Europe as one of our strands, at which we had (Ivan) Krastev. We had tried to discuss it in the public arena.

So that was why I wasn't really involved in the campaigns. But if somebody said, 'We're going to talk to a big student group,' they knew that I was the kind of person that they might ask to do the gig, because I did a lot of student talks. That would be any of the campaigns. Or where it was, 'Would you come and talk to a lot of trade unionists?' it would be me and Graham Stringer. Somebody would say, 'Claire Fox would be a good person to get to go and talk to a bunch of workers,' type of thing, so I'd be invited to speak. And if I could do it, I did it.

UKICE: I was just going to ask – were you surprised by the result, Claire?

CF: I'm not so different to anyone else, but I suddenly thought, 'Oh my God, we're going to win,' and then Jo Cox was murdered. That was a heart-stopping moment for all sorts of reasons. It was shocking in the extreme, a British MP butchered in that way. I was very conscious of the fact that it could and might well be used, as it was, to argue that this was the new racist Britain,

and therefore her murder was associated with it. I was asked to do *Any Questions?* the day after her murder. I remember, I was on a lunchtime panel at the Royal Society of Arts, on Europe, on the Friday, and I spoke at that.

As I said to them, at the time, 'You want to know why Leave might win? Listen to yourselves.' Because it was the most sneering, contemptuous event; one of the all-time highs or lows of an atmosphere that had developed amongst a particular type.

I left at lunchtime, and heard the news about Jo Cox, and thought, 'Well, so much for me saying, 'Leave are going to win – That's not going to happen.' On the Saturday, I was asked to do *Any Questions?* which was in a studio, because they'd cancelled it on the Friday night as two of the panellists knew Jo and it seemed inappropriate. So they had a kind of special *Any Questions?* with myself, Polly Toynbee, Max Hastings and Peter Osborne. It was nerve racking.

Exactly what happened was what I anticipated, which was that Polly Toynbee more or less said this had finished off the vote and proved how reactionary Leave was, and I argued against it. I mention that because so many people heard it. People I've never heard of contacted me – that was very close to the referendum – and just said, 'Thank you for saying that.' Quite a lot of people on the left were beginning to contact me and say, 'It's a good job you're there. There are not enough left wingers, so you've encouraged me.'

But I thought that that would probably hold it back, so I had a brief flowering of a moment of thinking Leave would win, but then thought that maybe it wouldn't. So I just didn't know on the night itself.

The other significant thing that I couldn't get over was some CBI event that I was also at, where CEOs of big corporates stood up and said, 'Go back to your workers tomorrow, and tell them to vote Remain, or they won't have any jobs.' I said, 'You don't own them. It's not feudalism. You can't tell your workers which way to vote on threat of their jobs.' But I underestimated the employees of major corporations, because actually, that's what happened.

For the following week after that event, I kept hearing the CEO of Airbus, or the CEO of whoever would put out some statement and address the staff. They

were having big staff gatherings. They were actually having all their employees together, and telling them. I thought, 'My God, no-one's going to be able to withstand this amount of threats. Why would you?' It was remarkable what they did. So I was a bit pessimistic, but I thought it would be very close. That was the main thing I thought was, it was going to be very, very close, and it was.

UKICE: Do you think it would've ended differently if Labour had campaigned harder?

CF: You see, I don't really know that it would've done. Because the problem for Labour was that they'd already lost their traditional base. So in some ways, the people who voted Remain, lots of them were Labour and they were always going to vote Remain. If you mean would ordinary working-class people who have been associated with the Labour Party have voted Remain, if the Labour Party had argued for it? Well, a lot of them hadn't taken a lot of notice of the Labour Party for a while. They already felt fairly alienated.

Who would you have advocated going out to having the row with Mrs Smith in Sunderland? Think about those campaigners. Who were they? I can't see it, myself. The main thing for me was the tone of the campaign. What could have won it for Remain was a positive case for the EU. That's it. It had been a fair chance. If they had decided, 'Let's stop calling everyone a racist. Let's stop telling everyone that's it's Armageddon round the corner.' If they had gone out and argued a consistently positive case for remaining in the EU, and saying that you'd argue for reform, and explained what that reform might look like, they would have stood a chance. But that isn't what happened.

So I don't think it was Labour. They might have been the ones who would have done that, but they didn't do it. Nobody did it. It's just that I think sending Hilary Benn to Sunderland to engage – it just wouldn't have worked. And Corbyn couldn't do it, because everybody knew he was a Leaver. Let's be honest. He couldn't have done it to their face in the right way, because I think he knew he would have been exposed. Because everybody would say, 'Well, you've argued the opposite for 25 years or 40 years or something.' It wouldn't have worked. So I think the broad Remain campaign strategy was its worst enemy.

I meant to say, after Jo Cox's murder, the other thing that happened was that every meeting was cancelled after that for a week. But then I did go to some gathering. It was interesting, because another thing was that I was very struck, as I went round and talked around the country, at how multi-ethnic the Leave audiences were.

The Afro-Caribbean Societies at universities were all Leavers. It was like, 'Oh, hello.' I wasn't expecting that, necessarily. And lots and lots and lots of Asian activists were involved in Leave campaigns when I was going to the north. I wasn't necessarily expecting that. I was like, 'Oh, hello.' Obviously, 'Asian' is a broad category, so there would be different reasons and all sorts of things. But often trade unionists, too.

Anyway, I went to one event after Jo Cox, before the referendum, and a number of people said to me that they were not sure about whether to vote for Leave. But the way that they had been blamed for Jo Cox's murder had pushed them over the line to vote Leave. So I thought that was fascinating. It was counterintuitive, but I think that there have been lots of counterintuitive things in this whole five-year period.

UKICE: That's my general theory of Brexit, that every move actually provokes an unexpected outcome. When the referendum result was confirmed did you have a view about what was then going to happen? David Cameron stepped down from the Conservative leadership. Did you have a view on how this would play out, or indeed, ought to play out?

CF: I was really shocked when Cameron stood down. I remember it, of course, and thought it was an act of supreme cowardice. I realised that it would be a very destabilising thing that had happened, which it proved to be. It made people feel a bit rudderless and abandoned. The person who'd called this referendum just walks away on the morning. Now, you might say it was a very principled thing to do. But actually, it kind of felt like, 'Oh my God, you can't just leave us now. You're meant to see it through. You called it. You asked us. We told you. Now, do it. Not go off in a strop and leave the country without a leader.'

So people were discombobulated, and it felt as though it was a very unstable period. People were obviously delighted, initially – Leavers, I mean – about

what had happened, but it really didn't take long for the attacks to start on Leavers again. So the reason I've mentioned that is, the speed with which they started to demonise Leave voters became the preoccupation of Leave voters.

I genuinely think that the rot, in terms of hardening up the Leave votes, started the day after the referendum. Because once you started to demonise people that way – and it carried on – then people started to become like, 'Well, we don't care who the Prime Minister is now. You've just got to deliver.' Do you see what I mean? That became the sort of mood.

UKICE: You've talked about people demonising Leave voters. Who do you think was the culprit?

CF: Well, I collected a folder of newspaper articles, so every single *Guardian* newspaper article, the *New Statesman*, *The Independent*, and *The Times*. So I was invited to a media party on the Saturday; one I go to every year. I don't get invited to very many big media parties, but I'd been going to this one for a few years, and I went along. When the door was opened to me, somebody said, 'Oh my God, it's you. You've come.' I thought, 'Hello. I thought it was a party.' Now, they jokingly said, in the invitation – by the way, hundreds of people go to this, and lots of political people – 'We'll either be commiserating or celebrating, but whatever, we're having the party.'

During the course of that night, I was subject to what can only be described as some rather unsavoury abuse. There weren't very many people who'd voted Leave there, but there were some. We were in a corner, in the garden. Every time I went to get a drink, somebody would come up to me and say, 'You've destroyed this country, you and your racist mate.' It was like, sort of, 'You're a writer for a major newspaper. Stop shouting, drunkenly, at me, in the corner,' because that happened.

But also, I was speaking at a festival on education, on the night of the referendum. I'd organised a big event for sixth formers at an education festival, at which A.C. Grayling was speaking. He was our main guest for the Academy of Ideas. We asked him to speak on democracy and the history of democracy. You couldn't make it up, in retrospect. But he and I were great mates then. He gave a brilliant speech. Lots of sixth formers loved it, and that

was that.

At dinner that night, with lots of educationalists – everyone from universities and schools – they were ribbing me: ‘It’ll all be over tomorrow. You can go back to being normal, instead of being a lunatic. Wake up in the morning,’ That was the kind of mood. When I went into the green room the next morning, obviously, feeling rather pleased, people were rushing up to me and screaming in my face. My mates.

Then I was speaking on a panel for my book, *I Find That Offensive*. It was about free speech in schools, and we had an audience. The Chair said, ‘Whatever you think about Brexit, we’ve still got to have this discussion.’ The first speaker, who was a speaker from a major public school, stood up and talked about neanderthal knuckle draggers who had brought this country down to the level of fascism, and spoke about ‘ignorant people’, and said, ‘This is why education is necessary, to stop this ever happening again,’ with no sense of irony.

I wrote about these things afterwards. In other words – I’m not making this up – it was a febrile atmosphere. You thought, ‘We’ve just won a legitimate referendum. Stop shouting at me, and stop me calling me a racist and a fascist.’ Now, if that was happening to me, it was happening to Mrs Smith, who ran the group in Sunderland. They were watching this unravelling in real time.

So not only had the Prime Minister abandoned his post, and we didn’t know what was happening, but people just felt, ‘God, what have we done wrong? We haven’t done anything wrong.’

UKICE: When Theresa May emerged as Prime Minister, did you think she understood the motivation behind Brexit?

CF: I was never enthusiastic about her. She was such a reactionary Home Secretary. I’ve never had any time for her, personally, but there we go. I’m not a Tory, so it was their leadership. Also, I was nervous about the fact that she hadn’t been a Leaver.

But she talked a good talk, didn’t she? So I then thought, ‘Okay, well, maybe the Tories have to deliver.’ It never dawned on me, by the way, that they

wouldn't do it. I suppose it never dawned on me that they'd try to get out of it, so I just thought she'd do it. I thought 'Maybe, she's a technocrat, and because she's a technocrat, she'll just do it.' She sounded as though she was going to do it.

Obviously, the general election was the disaster. Once that happened, you realised that things were not going to go well. So that was an interesting moment. But no, I had no reason to imagine she'd be any worse than anyone else, I suppose. I was fairly indifferent to the leadership.

The Brexit Party

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): What was the path that then took you from being a campaigner, but not a member of any of these parties? You said you didn't consider joining UKIP. What was your path, then, towards the newly-founded Brexit Party? Were you involved with the people behind that, before it was launched?

Claire Fox (CF): Not at all. The path was four years of tearing my hair out, like everybody else. There was I, thinking it was all going to happen. I thought, 'I can go back to normal life now.' I went back to normal life, like everybody else. I was bemused and irritated by the attacks on voters for voting Brexit. I thought the negotiations were being done in good faith, behind the scenes. There were various indications that, maybe, that wasn't happening, but I wanted to believe it was. I only spoke on it as much as anyone ever asked me. I had no involvement in any of this at all.

There were a lot of Leavers groups that set up. There was a Leavers of Britain group that got set up, and they were a rank-and-file leavers group. They didn't spring up straight away, but basically, they started to spring up maybe eighteen months before the EU elections. So there started to be a bit of organisation. They really were rank-and-file groups, all around the country. They were set up by someone, but they weren't set up by any official people.

Remember, all the official Leave people were now in Government selling us out. Where was Michael Gove? Oh yes, I remember: he was going along with Theresa May. So there wasn't any organised Leavers' movement, but there were lots of frustrated Leavers. So I started being asked to speak at a lot of

those Leavers groups, and I started doing it.

I did the *Sky Paper Review*. You think, 'Having done *The Moral Maze* for 20 years, and nobody had ever heard of me. I do the *Sky Paper Review*, and everybody's heard of me.' It shows you the difference of media. But I was a regular Sky 'Paper Reviewer', and I was just getting deluged from people saying, 'Thank God you're on, countering all this and all that.' And a lot of the Leavers groups knew me, so they invited me to speak. I realised there was this dynamic build up of anger and frustration.

So to answer your question: I was back at the Academy of Ideas, frustrated like everyone else; just a punter and a pundit. All that happened was – and this is genuinely what happened – at the start of 2019, I said to my family and friends, 'Do you know what? I'm so bloody tempted to stand in the European elections if they actually happen, if we're still in, because it's driving me mad. I'm going to have a nervous breakdown with the exasperation of everything. It's just driving me mad.'

I was worried, because people were getting very angry. They were very angry and disillusioned with the democratic process, and felt totally betrayed. It was a very, very febrile, horrible atmosphere, and I felt that. I did a Sky 'Paper Review'. Something had happened in the news that day, there was a betrayal, and I basically said, 'Right, that's it. So we've lost, haven't we? Let's be honest: we've lost. They just refuse to let Brexit happen. I can't believe it.' I basically got loads of hate mail on social media from Leavers, who said, 'If you abandon us, we've got no-one left.'

I felt guilty, but obviously, I really believed it was over. But they wanted me to say it wasn't over. I felt terribly guilty about that, because I thought, 'I don't want to be pessimistic. I want to be optimistic, but it's over. We've lost. They've shafted us'. That was my mood.

I then went and talked to quite a few people. If you remember, we were meant to be leaving, so we didn't know whether there would be any European elections. But I'd got to the point where I just didn't believe we were ever going to leave. So I started informally talking to people: 'If there are European elections, should there be a sort of liberal left slate?' Anyway, that kind of dawdled on. 'Good idea, Claire. We'll have a committee meeting.' It was

obvious nothing was going to happen.

I went to a really large left Leave meeting. Hundreds of people. It was the week before the rally that Leave.EU called, or whatever it was called – Farage’s lot, then, on 29 March. So the week before, there was a big Left Leave meeting. There were hundreds of people at it. Hundreds. I wasn’t speaking; I was just in the audience. Yes, everybody was very angry, but everybody was very distanced from it all. I said, from the floor, ‘I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m going to that rally on 29 March. I’m furious. I think we should forget all this left-right stuff. It’s nonsense. We’ve got to go down there, all of us. Every single one of us has got to get hundreds of people and go down to that rally on the 29 March.’

I didn’t just say that, but that was part of what I said. Anyway, this led to a massive split in the room. Lots of people were agreeing with me. Loads of people, particularly on the panel, were saying, ‘We can’t go there, because Farage is organising it.’ I just said, ‘I don’t care. I’m going.’

I went to the pub, and somebody came up to me and said, ‘Would you be interested in speaking at the rally?’ I didn’t know who that person was, at that stage, but it was Gawain Towler. I said, ‘No, I’m not speaking at a rally with Farage. Don’t be ridiculous.’ Anyway, they sent me an email and they said Paul Embery was speaking and Kate Hoey was speaking, and I decided to do it.

I was very nervous because of the reaction in this meeting, even to me saying we should go to an event that Farage was associated with. But I did that. I did speak. I loved that day. I hated the way the media portrayed it. I loved that day, because it was what I remembered about Brexit. It was joyous, and it was democratic, and it was authentic. I hated singing ‘Rule Britannia’. It wasn’t that I liked the panel, but I loved the atmosphere of the day.

I spoke, and I went down very well, and I got approached to stand in the elections by Farage. Well, not by him, but by someone. I went in to see Nigel Farage and Richard Tice. I’d barely met Nigel. I’d met Nigel Farage years ago, but I had only ever seen him, in recent times, at that rally. He nodded at me; he didn’t exactly ... We know we don’t get on, politically, so we weren’t being friendly.

I went to see them, and they asked me if I'd stand, and I said, 'No.' I tackled him about the poster. I pointed out I was a lefty. I pointed out that he spent most of his time attacking Corbyn for being a Marxist, and that I had been the publisher of 'LM', which was 'Living Marxism', and that they had too many unsavoury people around the Brexit Party that had been launched. They'd just expelled two people. One of them had been a founder. I said, 'That wasn't some PC madness; that was because they were racist. You're associated with racism far too much for me.'

Having said all that, I phoned up an Asian mate of mine who'd met Farage a few times – but was a Remainer – before I went to have this meeting. I said, 'Do you think that Nigel Farage is a racist?' and he said, 'Nigel Farage is not a racist. But whereas I can smell a racist at 10 paces, Nigel Farage can't.'

I thought that was a pretty good summation of where we were at. Farage, himself, is not a racist, but he's got no sensitivity on that question. I thought it was a good answer. But then I ended up telling this Remain mate that I'd been asked to stand in the EU – bearing in mind a Remainer – and he said, 'I think you should do it.' I said, 'Bloody hell, that's the last thing I expected you to say.' He said, 'We have betrayed a democratic vote, and although I was an active campaigner for Remain, I am outraged at the damage we're doing to democracy. If you can stand and say that this is not a right wing project and not leave it up to Farage and his mates, but show that there are other people, then you should do it.'

I still went and saw Farage and Tice and told them I wasn't going to do it, and had a row with them. I said, 'I'll support you, but I'm not standing.' Then I spent a week where different things happened, culminating in David Lammy calling the ERG worse than Nazis. I phoned them up the following week and said, 'I've had enough. I'm going to do it,' and that's what I did. My family and friends were pretty outraged at my decision.

UKICE: Were you surprised by how successful the Brexit Party was?

CF: No, because I always said that if it came to the European elections, any party that stood in them for Brexit would win hands down.

UKICE: Were you impressed by Farage's campaign in the lead-up?

CF: He's intuitively smart enough to know he's an opportunist, and he knows Brexit, and he knew what to do. If you look at all of the people who got elected as MEPs, and the people who stood, they had gone to great lengths to be diverse. And this was something I was told, anyway. Supposedly, that's why I was asked. But they had gone across the board, politically. There were hardly any Corbynisters or anything, but they just weren't your usual suspects. They didn't want it to be UKIP Mark II, and it wasn't, and it was pretty obvious.

So I thought that Farage was very astute to have done that. He's a good operator at that level. It wasn't a political party. It was a political party for the moment of standing in a European election. I think that when they stood in the general election that was pretty obvious, and I didn't stand. They were never going to be a political party, I didn't think. We'll see what happens with what they're doing now. So, yes, that was what I was impressed with. But I think you have to give him credit that he saw that moment.

I was going to say, I was on *Newsnight*. This was before I was asked to stand, but where it was pretty obvious we were not going to leave on 29 March. I was on with a number of pundits. I said, 'If the EU election happens, Brexit will be reaffirmed.' I couldn't understand why they even wanted that to happen. I said, 'If you stand when the EU elections happen, you're going to get a thrashing.' Well, I didn't say it in those terms.

The person I was on with, which was hilarious, said, 'Don't be ridiculous, Claire. Nobody votes in the EU elections. Nobody will bother voting.' I said, 'So this is the institution that you are defending as democratic, and you're telling me that the way that you know that you'll get away with this is because nobody will vote in the EU elections.' I said, 'Let me tell you, this time, they will, in their millions,' and they did.

UKICE: Did you think that the Brexit Party should try to become a proper political party when those discussions started happening?

CF: Yes. I keep going back to what you said earlier, when you said, 'Almost the opposite happened to what people expected'. If there hadn't been this assault on the electorate after the referendum result, which then consolidated Leavers as Leavers in a sort of identity-type way, with Remainers also emerging as an identity rather than just a vote in a referendum, then I think that

that populist revolt around Brexit would have been a moment that would not have lasted.

After four years of feeling under assault, it became a politicised movement, if that makes any sense, so you really had an atmosphere. During the course of that four years, everything changed. So people started to read, to become politicised, talked about the establishment in much more detail, understood what the House of Lords represented, the constitutional issues. So I'd go out, and people would be talking to me in detail about constitutional change, in a way that you couldn't make it up.

When I stood in the European elections, that was the level of sophistication from the voters, who were all queuing up to meet me in the north west – like they were interviewing me, because they'd read all this stuff about me. Obviously I was not uncontroversial, to say the least, and there had been all these things written about me. So they were coming out to make sure I wasn't some sort of terrorist-loving scum, who supported child porn, which was, basically, what was being said. They were basically interviewing me on the side of the street.

In Stockport, there was a queue to talk to me. It wasn't because I was a star; it was the opposite. At the end of it, they asked me 16 questions, and they'd go, 'You're alright, you,' and walk off. It was unsentimental, to say the least. So I'd passed my interviews with these people. But the thing was that all of them, one after another, were highly politicised. They'd become politicised during that time. They all had opinions on everything, and well-informed opinions. They were reading widely.

So I say all that because the slogan, 'Change Politics for Good,' which the Brexit Party came up with, actually had a resonance beyond Brexit. Brexit had come to represent more than Brexit. It had come to represent, 'If you want a populist revolt-.' And this is where we go back to the elites question. By the end, people were saying, 'We need to change politics for good. We need to change everything. It's not just Brexit; Brexit is just the start. That gives us our voice. We are fed up with being done to and treated like dirt, treated with contempt. We now want a say in British politics. We're going to change everything. We've got our voice back.' That was, basically, the message.

So there was the basis for a new political party to emerge. The one which had captured the imagination was the Brexit Party. The Brexit Party could have become a new political party, but it was obvious, to me, that it was unlikely to be able to because of the way it was being run.

UKICE: Can you expand a bit more about that?

CF: It's straightforward. It's one thing saying that you had to do this quickly this way. You had to just establish a party. No membership, just supporters, and get on and do it for the European elections. But it didn't sufficiently feel to me as though it was able to transform into a proper grassroots political party. There were lots of very positive things. Some of the people who stood as parliamentary candidates were fantastic.

I didn't join the official Brexit Party tours around the general election. I spoke at one or two of the rallies. But I basically organised my own north west work. Bloody hell, I went on the road and talked to lots of meetings in working men's clubs and pubs and everything, with people who were standing in the northwest, and people wanted change. There was no doubt about it. But they got squeezed by the Tories. It was understandable.

I didn't think that the Brexit Party established itself in such a way that it could become a meaningful political party, despite the aspirations. Which was a shame, because I wanted it to be, in a way. I wanted a new party. Not even for myself, but I wanted people to feel they had a choice. They hated the choice between the Tories and Labour. They just hated it.

UKICE: But do you think that for many people in the Brexit Party the objective was to change the Conservative Party, and with Boris Johnson's accession it basically was job done?

CF: No. That might have been the atmosphere for a lot of voters, but no, that wasn't the aspiration of the Brexit Party. The people who run the Brexit Party were not pro-Tory. They're not wanting to change the Conservatives. No, no aspirations like that. They wanted to be a new thing.

I think that, for the voters, it was psychological. By the way, it was for me as well. Once Boris (Johnson) won the leadership – again, that was yet another

indication that Brexit was still the big issue for people. What it had become was the big issue for people, and the Tories knew that. And Boris, at that stage, embodied it.

When voters started to look at voting for Boris, it was very much, 'Boris will deliver Brexit.' But what they also felt, even more strongly, and I don't think you can overemphasise it, was fear that a remain alliance was trying to scupper the votes of ordinary people. So the hatred for what was happening in parliament was palpable. 'How dare they? They're our MPs, and they're just ignoring us and saying they know better.' Or, 'How dare they use the constitution in this way, to play shenanigans, to thwart a democratic vote?'

People were furious. I'd get these emails saying, 'I've been investigating prorogation.' It was a word I'd never heard of. 'And this is why we should be able to do it, we've got to stop them.' That was what it was like. So it got to this point where you'd do anything to stop Remainers. Leavers needed a psychological win, because they thought they were going to lose.

Somebody said to me, 'I have never known why anyone would ever have a civil war, and I do now.' If you remember, before 29 March, it felt like that. It was scary. That was one of the reasons I stood, by the way, because I thought, 'Jesus Christ, I can't just sit there, doing the Sky 'Paper Review'.' Do you know what I mean? I had to step up.

UKICE: So what did you think when Boris finally lands his deal? Do you think, 'Yay, we're back on track?'

CF: No. So I'm saying the psychological win was won when the Tories won the last election. That was what the mood was, wasn't it? 'There you go. The red wall has collapsed. We knew that was going to happen.' You could say, 'Well, the Brexit Party were humiliated,' And I hated the fact that people didn't do very well, because they'd worked so hard everything. I was one of the people who thought, 'Maybe, they might get one or two people elected,' and even then, I wasn't really very optimistic.

But once Boris won, then you felt as though more would happen. The concentration on the deal – I understand why you're interested in it – is not what the people who voted Tory in that election were trying to do. They

weren't obsessing with the nature of the deal; they were obsessing with, 'We want proof that our vote, in 2016, counted.' So that was what they were doing.

Everybody knew that the Withdrawal Agreement – Theresa May's agreement – was a way of only superficially delivering Brexit. So people were reading the Withdrawal Agreement. It was being parsed by people on Twitter. It was ridiculous. Because they wanted to become politicised, everyone was going into great detail.

But by the time Boris came along, people didn't want to know. This was why the Brexit Party failed in the general election. The Brexit Party had a reasonably accurate critique of the problems with Boris's oven-ready deal, which it rightly pointed out was very similar to Theresa May's deal. But by that stage, the electorate just didn't want to know, because they wanted to have this psychological win against the Remain alliance. So it was like, 'We need to have someone that we can vote for, who's going to make sure that those people don't, eventually, succeed.' Because there were possibilities of a second referendum. It had gone beyond whether Theresa May's deal was any good; it was whether we were going to get anything at all.

So now, I think that what's happened is very hard to assess because of Coronavirus. It's just almost impossible to know what would have happened: how interested people would have been in that deal, and the details of the deal. So if you're in the Brexit Party WhatsApp groups that I'm in, there are obviously people who are following, in as much detail as you all are in your professional lives. They know the details of the debates on fisheries to the Nth degree. They know every single detail of the Internal Market Bill, and what's wrong or right with it. They are following it.

But there is no popular resonance for that. So I just don't know whether what's happened is that people just do not have the headspace to consider Brexit in great detail. One thing that definitely is true, though, is that people do not think that you need a deal, because the deal was never what it was about, anyway. They don't think you need a deal, and they prefer to have no deal than something which could be seen to give the EU jurisdiction over UK sovereignty, in any way. That's a broad-stroke position.

The future of British politics

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE): So the people that voted for Brexit – obviously, there's ending EU jurisdiction – do you think they have any expectations of seeing any more concrete benefits?

Claire Fox (CF): It's absolutely nothing to do with concrete benefits. It never was. It never, ever, ever, ever, ever was. That's why all those people who were told they would lose their jobs if they voted to leave voted to leave, regardless of the fact they might lose their jobs. People decided that this was a principle on which they, as the electorate, should decide on the politics of the United Kingdom. That's what they decided. That was the predominant discussion you had with everybody, all the time. It carries on. That's all that people want.

In other words, what had happened was that popular sovereignty had been squeezed out in a technocratic fashion. People felt that they had been treated as an object to be done to, and they wanted to be centre stage again. Now, all of the mechanisms through which, previously, people had asserted their agency – things like trade unions – collapsed.

The Labour Party were taken over by identity politics people, who were basically asking you about your pronouns. Do you know what I mean? I mean, what? So that wasn't any good. Even the Tory Party, where it's working-class rank and file, had either gone a bit woke, or had proved that they were all remainers. That was even worse.

Because all these people I forgot to mention – that mass number of Eurosceptic Tories that I'd known for all those years, annoying me with their jokes about the EU – all campaigned for Remain, to the last one of them. There were no Tories in the room left of any Eurosceptic character who voted for Leave. That's why we all know that Boris and Gove exist, because nobody else did it. It's utterly phenomenal. People I'd known for years on the Eurosceptic scene abandoned it. Just as bad as anything Corbyn did.

So for ordinary people, then, their usual community organisations and civil society has been being eroded for some time. I'm sounding like a *Daily Mail* editorial at this point. But you try to organise a community event in your area, and you have to go through so many checks and regulations and so on, you can't organise it. As a result, self-activity of ordinary people in this country has

been squeezed for a long time. Brexit became an expression of people saying, 'We've had enough of it.'

Now, I know that doesn't appear to have anything to do with the EU, but the EU represented a body that basically said, 'We know better than you, and you have got no say in it.' So at the removal of the first layer, that stopped you from being able to assert your right, as a voter, to be treated equally at the ballot box.

I am the cleaner. You are the corporate CEO. We are not equal, except when we vote. Then we are equal. It's the basis of political equality. It's hugely important. So that's what people were interested in. So when you say, 'They don't see the ECJ. Why would they be worried?' They understood what the ECJ meant, which is a court that's got nothing to do with the UK, and therefore they can't say anything about it. They have to take the dictates of that court. That's what people don't like. That's what they were arguing against. That's what they fought against.

UKICE: Do you think the people who became very politicised remain politicalised?

CF: We don't know. None of us know, and Covid is a curve ball. Let's use the analogy of Trump voters. I always feel uncomfortable, because I know it's a different thing, but there is a broad populist thing. Brexit was the expression of it in the UK. You'd think it had gone, but it's there all the time. Obviously, Trump – even his base think he's an idiot. Do you know what I mean? It's like, sort of, 'Yes, we know it's Trump,' but the point is, the sentiment there expressed itself in the American elections.

But people thought it had gone. They thought it was over. Even now, the Democrats, who have won – I don't mean the Democrat politicians, by the way, but so many commentators – are saying, 'The thing I despair about is that so many millions of people voted for Trump, which just proves that racism and xenophobia and homophobia are alive and well in this country, and we've got a problem with the alt-right.' So talk about not learning anything. Unbelievable. So you demonise the voters, even when you've won. Have a bit of graciousness, for God's sake.

If Brexit was a sort of kick back against technocratic experts telling people how to behave, then Covid is the greatest irony of all time. But what is also interesting is, although I think it's changing, quite a lot of Brexit voters and Leave activists were quite pro the lockdown. Despite everything and what people think, it's not an easy split.

I've never been a lockdown sceptic in a kind of Toby Young or James Delingpole way, although, increasingly, I'm furious about the attacks on civil liberties, without any accountability. Anyway, that to one side, a lot of Brexit activists, it was quite interesting, because one of the things that I found they would be saying early on is that they didn't want to criticise Boris because he was the guy who delivered Brexit. But also, because socially, instinctively, they wanted to show social solidarity.

They were the kind of people who'd say, 'Oh God, there are all these self-indulgent libertarian types who don't want to wear masks.' Somebody said to me, 'I get fed up with these people who are demanding the right to do yoga in the park, when we're in the middle of a pandemic. Grow up. Stay at home.' In other words, people were sort of like, 'We're prepared to make the sacrifices. We've always done this for our communities.' In other words, we're very community orientated.

So it was an interesting thing, because quite a lot of Brexiters have been very critical of the lockdown measures. And I have been in the last three or four months. But not all Brexiters were like that. It was much more split, so that was an interesting thing. I think it shows you, first of all, that Leave voters are not easily caricaturable, despite the fact that people try to do that, and it's a more interesting, layered type of person who considers themselves to be socially communitarian.

But to answer the question, I just think that it hasn't gone away, but it will take a different form. So it's definitely not got passive. That's what I would say. But I think Covid has meant the idea of popular sovereignty has had the stuffing kicked out of it.

UKICE: If you look at some of the things in the Brexit Party platform on constitution change, there's some sorts of elements which actually look like the sort of thing you'd normally expect to see in a Liberal Democrat manifesto,

about PR, House of Lord reform, and all those sorts of things. Do you think that there is now a momentum for more domestic constitutional reform once we've got Brexit, once we get to 1 January? Or is it sort of job done, and we've got loads of other preoccupations?

CF: Yes, definitely not job done. What I'm trying to say is, Brexit has become symbolic for something else. Therefore, 1 January is symbolic, but it is not job done. So I'm saying that the thing that happened in the four years – which is ironic, because it was an unintended consequence of the way that Leavers were demonised – is that everybody became obsessed with constitutional reform so that politics would become more democratic. That was what the rows were over for four years. That's what the Brexit Party understood when they had the slogan, 'Change Politics for Good.'

They did well in the European elections. They did very badly in the general elections. Now, Farage and Tice have launched this new thing, which by the way is nothing if not opportunistic. It understands the moment sufficiently well to have done this. As usual, Farage is spot on in terms of a mood. Whether they can deliver is a different thing. But don't forget, whether it's Reform UK or the Brexit Party, or anything, there is a mood to say democracy needs to be sorted out.

I've just joined the House of Lords but everybody wants to abolish it, and good. I wanted to abolish it. I want to abolish it. I think its behaviour in relation to Brexit won't be forgotten easily. It's as simple as that. It just won't be forgotten. People were shocked. They'd never thought about the House of Lords in that way. They couldn't believe the likes of Andrew Adonis and the rest of them. They just couldn't believe it. They were absolutely shocked. They thought it was just a second chamber; they didn't realise it was a political activist movement, and it was going to say, 'We're going to stop what the people want.' They were absolutely openly contemptuous of the electorate – anti-democratic, in explicit terms.

So I think, therefore, people won't forget any of that. So any party – whether Reform UK, or any party that is able to set itself up as a party – could do very well on constitutional questions.

The problem for the Lib Dems is, the Lib Dems might have sounded like that in

the past, but they haven't sounded like that for a long time. So nobody thinks of the Lib Dems as associated with constitutional reform or democratic accountability. No-one thinks of them like that anymore. They might have done, but they've abandoned that role. That's what is so ironic. Even as civil libertarians, they've been useless.

So anybody who's looking around, they're not going to go, 'I'm interested in constitution reform. I must join the Lib Dems.' Bloody hell. Possibly Starmer could do it, but the Labour Party is so compromised over Brexit. I don't know whether Starmer can do it. I just don't. The jury is out, isn't it?

The anti-Semitism issue, which people thought would be a narrow issue that wouldn't ever do over the Labour Party, actually did. Again, because so many Labour Party activists called Leavers racist, they all took a great interest in the anti-Semitism question; something which, actually, was only ever discussed in small circles. But there, I'd be going and doing a talk in Salford, and everybody was going, 'Never mind anything else, I've got a dossier, here, of the Labour Party's history on anti-Semitism. How dare they call us racist?' And I'm thinking, 'You've got a dossier? Bloody hell.'

Because in other words, it became a way of saying, 'Don't you tell us that we're the backward racists. Look at your record.' So something which was actually a sort of not widely-discussed thing became popularised, because the Labour Party leadership effectively called Leavers racists. So all of these things mean that the traditional parties are going to find it very hard to satisfy the atmosphere and the mood. But I still don't know how much of the stuffing has been knocked out of people by Covid, as to know what form it will take or when it will happen.

One thing on the blue wall Tory Party. Prior to Covid I was told this by people who joined it, who would never have thought of themselves as Conservatives – said, 'It's no longer the establishment Tory Party. It's going to be a popular Conservative Party, and it won't even be that Conservative; it will be radical.'

That was a kind of promise of this new Conservative Party. But I think that now people associate the Conservative Party with Matt Hancock, Boris Johnson being hopeless, and the restrictions on their liberties. And the north have had a hard time, and are going to be decimated by decisions taken by this

Government. I think it's hard to imagine that they can really pull off that transformation of the Conservative Party for the future.

So there is space for a new party. I'm not sure that Reform UK is it.

UKICE: Do you think that we're destined, forever, to be locked into this new identification as Remainers or Leavers, or will we, basically, get over it?

CF: No. I think it's sort of largely over, because my experience, on social media, is that FBPE people – they're like the ultras. There are maybe 300,000 of them, which is quite a lot if you're on the receiving end of one of their pile-ons. But it's not exactly a new movement. In other words, it's dwindled down. Most politicians will say, 'Brexit is going to happen.'

I did a debate, recently, for the Swiss Embassy – and I was on a panel with Gina Miller and Vicky Pryce and a former Labour MP, who'd been a leading member of the Remain campaign. The organiser asked me to be the person who represented Brexit. It was just recently, in the last couple of months, in the middle of lockdown.

They asked me to talk about Brexit, so I did my five minutes on whether breaking international law is a great offence – I was, basically, saying I wasn't as bothered about breaking international law as other people. But I tried to write a speech, rather than just say that.

Gina Miller and the other person who'd been on the Remain campaign basically didn't talk about Brexit at all, and spent the whole time agreeing with me about Covid and lockdown measures. So I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm the only person talking about Brexit'. I only did it because I was asked to, by the organiser. They talked about the disaster of Covid, and the way that the Government had dealt with Covid. I talked about Brexit, because he asked me to, but it made it look like I was clinging on. Whereas, actually, I didn't really want to talk about it at all.

So I'm saying that because I think it's gone. A lot of it has gone. So it takes the form of Twitter spats, but that's it. But that doesn't mean the sentiments have gone. That's the point. It doesn't mean the sentiments have gone. So when you get people who will say that anybody who's sceptical of the

lockdown are Covidiot, who are scientifically illiterate, stupid people, who are the type of people who voted Leave, it's not helpful. That is, basically, the kind of new form that it's taking, a bit, I think.

But I don't think people will walk round, saying, 'I'm a Leaver.' It will be like the miners' strike. It does matter whether you were a scab or not, whichever way you decide that is. Were you a miner, were you a copper, were you a scab sort of mattered, in those communities, for a long time. But in the end, I know people who will say, 'I'm an ex-miner,' and you go, 'Oh, you're an ex-miner,' and then you'll find out that they actually worked throughout the strike. But everyone has forgotten.

UKICE: Is there anything that happened that would make you think that Brexit was a bad thing, but it sounds like the answer would be, 'No.' What, for example, if it led to the breakup of the Union?

CF: On the breakup of the union, that is very important, because I do think that gives pause for thought, inevitably. I think that people who want the Union to survive, in relation to Scotland, have to come up with better arguments than they have. In the end, if you can't think of a way of winning over the people who live in Scotland to the idea of wanting to be part of the United Kingdom, then, I'm afraid, you lose it. I don't think that's Brexit's fault; I just think you can't just keep going, 'Well, you are part of the Union. We're not letting you go.' That's wrong, right?

So I don't want them to have another referendum. By the way, I think that devolution was the original problem. I've always been opposed to devolution, and I was brought up in Wales. I always thought it was completely ridiculous. That whole localism with devolution has always struck me as being a fake way of trying to make things more democratic, by bringing them closer to home.

But if you're from Wales, let me tell you, the Welsh Senedd is even further removed and more elitist than the Westminster parliament, if you're Welsh. It's a clique. It's a narrow, little clique that's got about as much empathy with the people of Wales as a wall, in my view. I don't think it ever resolved anything; it just created a Welsh elite, if you see what I mean. That's all that happened. Every establishment figure in Wales – every single one of them – voted Remain. They said, 'The people of Wales will vote Remain, because we

get lots of EU subsidies.’ And the people of Wales gave them short shrift in their reply, as we know.

So now, the thorny question is Northern Ireland. That issue is challenging. I don’t think it was widely discussed or thought through in the build-up to the referendum. It might well have been that if Remain had made an issue of it, it could have made people think again. That’s true. If it had been, ‘Do you really want to force this situation, whereby you emphasise that the border is artificial and difficult, and that it could lead to community tension’

I’m always anxious about talking about Ireland. But we know, historically, that it’s a contentious area, and that lots of people in mainland Britain were very strongly opposed to there being a united Ireland. And there was a very brutal conflict in relation to that. So if that had been emphasised, I could imagine that that could have maybe swayed some minds. But nobody said it, on either side.

There’s no point saying, ‘Brexit is going to lead to this,’ because I think, ‘Well, if you knew that, why didn’t you bloody say it at the time? You might have won a few votes.’ People in Northern Ireland might have said it. I’m not doubting that, by the way. I understand that. But I mean the mainstream arguments never encompassed it. Whenever I’ve said this before, Matthew Taylor has said, ‘I said it.’ It’s like, ‘I said it once on a *Moral Maze* programme. It’s not the same as campaigning for it. It’s not like I said it. None of us really thought about it.’

So I think that yes, if you’re going to vote for a major constitutional change, you have to be prepared for unanticipated, unexpected outcomes. That’s the risk of it. But I think that, for me, it was a moment of great democratic flowering, the like of which is rare. It’s completely politicised and transformed ordinary people’s experience of politics, and that’s what my life’s work has been about, hasn’t it. I try to make politics come alive for new generations and for ordinary working-class people, so that they won’t feel like shit all the time and that nobody cares what they think.

So if that was the outcome of it, I don’t care whether the Union breaks up, because something is more important than that, and that is democracy, for me. I’m a democrat, first and foremost. I believe in freedom and a free society. I think that people felt free enough, treated as equals, and not looked down

upon. I think to even taste that and savour it for some moments was, and has been, hugely historically important, and people won't forget it.