

Leavers worked very hard for years to secure Brexit – but we were also helped by a string of good luck

By Patrick O'Flynn MEP

A TV advert came out last year starring James Corden as a motorist driving through central London and finding that every single set of traffic lights miraculously favours him.

After cruising through about four sets in a row, a by-now-ecstatic Corden yells: “They call me Mr Green Light!” The advert serves as a useful reminder of how such a random thing as a run of good luck can change outcomes completely.

I was reminded of it while in Westminster last week to take part in the political circus surrounding the triggering of Article 50. Because, let's be frank, our victory has only partly been down to our collective political genius. It has also depended on an almost freakish number of factors and events having fallen in our favour in the most fruitful sequence.

No wonder many Remainers cannot break out of outright denial about Brexit. It is an occurrence that has come at them at very high speed, leaving them with an acute case of political PTSD. I suspect many re-run what has happened in their minds every day and simply cannot fathom how it happened.

Let me take you through the sheer number of consecutive green lights we have needed so you can fully appreciate what I mean.

Green light number one was staying out of the €uro and that depended on Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party

pressurising John Major and the other party leaders into supporting a referendum before entry. Had a stronger conviction politician such as Ken Clarke been PM at the time, there would have been no chance of a referendum lock on the single currency. But as luck would have it, Downing Street was occupied by a balancer rather than a leader, someone who responded to pressure. And as a result, the UK kept its monetary sovereignty and was able to observe the unravelling of the €uro experiment from the semi-detached sidelines.

The next green light was the failure of the Blair Government to impose transitional migration controls following EU enlargement in 2004. The bottom end of the labour market was flooded and talk of wage compression and pressure on public services took hold in working class communities.

Then came the failure of all the main party leaders to honour their commitment to giving a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Naturally a British rejection of Lisbon would have been hugely disruptive to the EU. But the treaty could surely have been repackaged for a second time with some more tweaks to reassure UK public opinion. But no, it was steamrollered through and as a result public resentment built.

The great financial crash of 2008 further built popular resentment against establishment figures and exacerbated the stagnation of living standards that oversupply of labour was already causing.

Then came another hugely important green light for Brexiteers – the formation of the 2010 Conservative-Lib Dem coalition under David Cameron. With Cameron already regarded with suspicion by the Tory base, the sight of him teaming up with Nick Clegg created the conditions for the rise of UKIP. And as well as transferring at least five points from the Tory score into the UKIP column, the very existence of the coalition also transferred ten points from the Lib Dems to Labour.

Another green light soon followed when the crashing of Lords reform by Tory MPs such as Jesse Norman gave Clegg an excuse to rat on boundary changes that Cameron was depending on for the 2015 election.

So Cameron, who like Major before him was a politician who responded to pressure and travelled light ideologically, was placed in the tightest of tight spots. What he had in addition – something the more cunning Major lacked – was a blithe overconfidence in his own ability to get out of such spots. Therefore, against the advice of George Osborne, he promised an In/Out referendum, confident that his brio would win the day, if and when that day ever arrived. A big green light for us there.

The lights were green again at the 2015 general election – with our First Past The Post electoral system delivering an unexpected outright Tory majority on a 37% vote share. Cameron was left with no excuse for not delivering the referendum.

Accordingly, 8th May 2015 was the first time that most people on the liberal left had even bothered to start contemplating having to win a plebiscite on EU membership. Up to that point most had dismissed the very idea of leaving as a fringe concern of a few right-wing Europhobes in the Tory Party and UKIP.

And even then, the early summer polls on EU membership showed Remain leads of 20-25%. Many pundits predicted a Remain landslide. So Labour and the Lib Dems felt able to take their eyes off the ball and plunge energetically into inward-looking party leadership contests. The prospect of a Leave referendum win was considered so remote that Jeremy Corbyn's long-time opposition to the EU was barely considered relevant by pro-Remain Labour members as they voted him in by a landslide.

Are you getting the idea by now? They call me Mr Green Light!

And more green signals followed: not only did the more broadly

appealing Vote Leave campaign win designation as the official Leave campaign (essential to keeping the dream alive), but the more immigration-focused alternatives were liberated to hit the segments of the electorate who responded to their blunter messaging. And nobody could claim collusion or choreography was going on between Vote Leave and Leave.EU because everyone knew that they really did hate each other.

Just as important was Cameron's botched "renegotiation". So cocksure was the then PM about his ability to win pragmatic voters around to Remain on economic grounds that he advertised in advance to his EU peer group that he would ultimately accept whatever they offered him. Unsurprisingly, a lousy deal was forthcoming.

Also, both David Cameron and George Osborne took bad reputational hits in the eyes of Labour-inclined voters in the months leading up to the referendum campaign they were destined to lead.

Cameron's, one vaguely recalls, concerned a slightly trumped up story about his late father's use of tax havens. Osborne's concerned benefit cuts and blew up when Iain Duncan Smith resigned from the Cabinet in protest. The appeal of Osborne in particular to sectors of the electorate that Remain needed to turn out was much reduced. And while Osborne allegedly had been damning about the intellectual capacity of IDS, there is little doubt about who outsmarted whom on this occasion.

So Remain was left with a derided renegotiation and an undercooked campaign led by two Tory posh boys and involving almost zero input from the ambivalent leader of the Labour Party. Even during the campaign itself some crucial luck broke our way when postal vote ballots dropped on a day when record immigration figures led the news.

When polling day itself dawned it should have come as no surprise that torrential rain unloaded on London – depressing

turnout in the Remain heartland.

So, my fellow Leavers, as well as recalling our heroic hard work and strategic brilliance, let us also try to understand rather better the trauma of our Remainer friends who were beaten before they even properly realised they were in a fight that they might lose.

One can only conclude that somebody up there must like us. I give you Article 50, courtesy of Mr Green Light.

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