AM: Eight Labour MPs and three Conservatives walked out on their parties earlier this year to try to create a new political force in the centre ground. I think it’s fair to say that things haven’t gone entirely according to plan. Chuka Umunna, you criticised recently the two major parties for being incompetent. Do you think your party has been competent so far?

CU: I do. But look, we’re a four-week old party – as you said, we only left the main party three months ago. It’s a complete start-up. We’re the youngest kid on the block in this election. And what have we got? We’ve got almost 100,000 supporters, a third of whom have joined over the course of this European election campaign. We’ve had over 15,000 people donate to the party. We managed to narrow down from 3,000 applications 70 candidates. So, you know, it’s in the nature of something that you start up in four weeks when you’re going up against parties that have been around for decades.

AM: If you’re the young kid on the block, you’re a confused young kid on the block. In your launch you had four different names for your party. You called yourselves the Tiggers, the Remain Alliance, the Independence Group and Change UK.

CU: Well, we started off three months ago as the Independent Group, because you can’t form a new party whilst you’re in an existing one. And the Electoral Commission said that we couldn’t use the name The Independent Group. But we basically have been called Change UK throughout the course of this campaign. And what we’re arguing for – this is an anti-Brexit party, we think this thing is an absolute disaster. And we’ve got to find a way out of the mess that we are in. And what I think we’re doing is that
we’re actually adding in these European elections to the remain vote. Because there are lots of people who won’t vote for other parties, that want a People’s Vote to remain in the European Union, who will vote for us.

AM: Staying with the question of competence, I’ve been looking at ballot papers for the European elections, and everyone’s got a logo except you. Why is there a blank space where yours should be?

CU: Because basically we had about two days to put in an application to register as a party when the Electoral Commission said, “look, if you want to stand in these European elections you’re going to have do so urgently.” And we were like, what does that mean? And they said, now. But one of the good things actually, when I got my ballot paper here in London, Change UK is second on that ballot.

AM: This is a serious point. Because your great opponents, the Brexit Party, have a single clear name, a single clear logo and a single clear message, and you simply don’t. And that is incompetent for a new party.

CU: No. I think at the end of the day the Brexit Party is all about Brexit. They don’t actually want to change our country. And in many respects actually it’s all about Nigel Farage. If we, say, just called ourselves the Remain Party, it wouldn’t have been true to who we are. Because part of our argument is, is that this Brexit mess is not actually going to change anything in our country or sort out the big problems that we face as a country. We actually need to resolve that so we can focus on the big issues. And I don’t think Nigel Farage is particularly interested in any of that.

AM: Okay. Let me read you what your lead candidate in Southwest England, Rachel Johnson, said very recently. She said,
“I’m jumping on a sinking ship with Change UK. Change UK is a terrible name. They want to focus group everything and they have a leadership team of about 11 people. It’s not riding the ocean waves the way Chuka thought it would.” She’s absolutely right. You’re sinking at the moment aren’t you?

CU: Well, you want to hear what she says about her brother. But she actually had a set of comments put to her by your colleague Andrew Neil and that was part of a kind of extended self-deprecating long joke. But, you know Rachel’s – hang on just a moment – it is a joke and it was taken out of context. And she actually came to us from the Liberal Democrats, and what we see in Change UK actually, about half of our candidates have no experience of politics before – we’ve got people from the armed forces, nurses, doctors etc, but we have also got people who were part of other parties. The Liberal Democrats, like Rachel, the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, who’ve actually come together to do something different.

AM: Let me quote to you somebody who certainly wasn’t joking and who’s gone in the other direction. This is your former lead candidate in Scotland, David Macdonald. “Quite clearly,” he says, “the numbers don’t stack up for Change UK. I hate to see that split in the remain vote, I am calling for those in favour of remaining in the EU, including supporters of Change UK in Scotland, to support the Liberal Democrats.” He was your lead candidate.

CU: Well, I obviously disagree with him and it’s disappointing what he’s done. But you have to be very careful. Remember, this is a system of proportional representation. If you try and tactically vote in the way that is suggested there it’s quite dangerous, not least because we don’t know what the turnout is going to be in different regions. And of course different parties have different strengths in different regions. But I return to the central point:
there are a lot of people who wouldn’t vote for the Liberal Democrats because of what the 2010 to 2015 Coalition government did on things like tuition fees, who would vote for us. So the real question is, of course Change UK wants to get the highest vote share possible in this, but we’re not tribal – and the other thing which is really important is that all the remain parties, we need to see their aggregate vote share come in as high as possible. 17.9 per cent in 2014. I think it’s going to be higher this time.

AM: Let me ask you about the point you were making just now, that you’ve got widespread support and people won’t vote Lib Dem because of austerity. You have been highly critical of the austerity period under George Osborne. Anna Soubry, one of your colleagues, thought it was a marvellous and necessary thing to do. How can people possible choose when you’re so divided on the fundamental economic question of our time?

CU: Well, I’d say the fundamental economic question of our time is whether you think we should proceed with Brexit or not. And we don’t. Because we think economically it will cause immense damage to this country. The second thing is if you actually look at – we’re mainly made up of former Labour MPs, of course, who voted against all of George Osborne’s budgets – but if you look at the Conservative MPs who’ve joined us, Anna has been extremely critical of the local government cuts. Sarah Wollaston, who is a former GP, has been very critical of the NHS cuts. And of course Heidi Allen our leader, actually one of the main reasons she left the Conservative Party was because of the welfare cuts. And our central argument is if you’ve got a group of people from different political traditions who can reach a consensus, then we can actually bring our country together.

AM: You have incoherence. “I personally think George did a great job. I’m a big fan of George Osborne’s. I think the Coalition
government that I served in did a marvellous job.” You fundamentally disagree with that, and then you’re standing side by side telling people you have a consistent plan for Britain.

CU: But we do. Which is to stay in the European Union. And the point is, I think that the public want to see more politicians from different political traditions actually coming to a consensus together. I mean, you can talk about difference of views. You look at the two main parties, which are fundamentally split on the biggest issue...

AM: Do you think the public also want their politicians to be consistent?

CU: Of course. But they also want them – they also want them, if you’ll just bear with me a moment – they also want them to reach across traditional political boundaries to come to a decision and consensus. And they’re actually fed up with some of the polarisation that they’ve seen.

AM: Let’s come to what you say is the fundamental question of our time, which is Brexit itself and look at your own position. Not that long ago. You’ll be familiar with this quote. This is 2016, after the referendum. So the referendum had happened, and you said this:

“I’m sorry I’m not one of those people who thinks we should be calling for a second referendum. I think that would just look like the referendum was fought under rules we agreed to, a result was delivered, because we don’t like it we now want to replay it again, which simply entrench a view that we’re some elite, who don’t want to pay any attention to the people. I’m sorry that’s just how I feel.’
CU: And what I also said in 2016, at the time, before that, I said – no, I said exactly the same in the House of Commons, but I caveated it by saying this, that –

AM: You didn’t caveat it there.

CU: If Brexit in the form - I did it in the House of Commons, I said if Brexit in the form that was promised to the British people cannot be delivered, then of course we should refer it back to the people. And that is entirely legitimate. And of course, remember, in 2016, who on earth thought that we were going to be in the mess that we’re in right now? The negotiations hadn’t even started.

AM: Okay. How is your policy on stopping Brexit different from that of the other anti-Brexit parties, the Lib Dems and so forth? CU: Well, I actually think things are moving very, very fast indeed, just compared to when you were on air last week. And I’ve come to the view that we are now at a point where we are going to need to revoke Article 50. And let me explain to you why. There are two very important things that have happened. First of all, at the beginning of these European election campaigns we had time to provide for a people’s vote on what happens on Brexit, which would take at least five to six months. We now no longer have the time to do that by the 31st October, when we are due to crash out. So we need to stop the clock to allow that to happen. And the second thing is an important thing that happened since your show last week, which is that the prime minister announced she would be bringing the Withdrawal Agreement back in the week of the third of June, and if she fails to get it through, which is almost certain she will not get it through, then she’s setting out a timetable for her departure. And what you see now are contenders for the Conservative Party leadership falling over themselves to say they will take us come what may in October
without a deal. Faced with that, no deal and revocation, you have got to revoke.

AM: You are saying under all circumstances now revoke Article 50.

CU: It’s the only way – it’s the only way –

AM: Because 17.4 million people will be outraged by that. It’s exactly what they feared is that they vote for one thing and it is stolen by the Westminster class.

CU: Well, I don’t believe that is the case. And I’ll tell you why. Because at the moment in order, as I said, the way to resolve this impasse is to refer it back to the people. I don’t see how you can thwart the will of the people if they get the final say. But the simple fact right now is we do not have time to do a people’s vote before the 31st October. And I think fundamentally -

AM: What are you saying to people – (talking together) You voted for Brexit and it’s now taken away from you..

CU: Andrew, I tell you what would be undemocratic is to impose a no deal Brexit on this country which there is not a mandate for. All the polls show that the majority of people want to remain in the European Union. And also we have two million young people who have no say on this at all that are going to have this imposed on them. That is undemocratic in my view.

AM: Final question. New kid on the block. If you don’t win any MEPs in this election, is that it, over for you, for Change UK? Party finished?

CU: No, no. No, absolutely not. I think what matters is how high our vote share is, and actually for all the remain parties, we want all the remain parties to get the highest possible vote share in
these elections. But we are faced with a national emergency. No deal is facing us in the face now, and we've got to deal with it.

AM: Thanks very much indeed for talking to us today.

(ends)