

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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TONY BLAIR

PRIME MINISTER, 1997-2007

AM: Before we come to the TIGers as they're now being called, let me ask you about the change in or the clarification of policy made by Jeremy Corbyn this week. He has come round to backing a second referendum. You must be delighted.

TB: Yes, I'm pleased with that. But I think right now the issue's not really the second referendum or not. I think we get to that at a later stage. The issues we speak today is does parliament agree to Theresa May's deal which is essentially a blind Brexit, in other words we don't know whether we're getting a hard Brexit or a soft Brexit. A hard Brexit is something like a Canada style free trade agreement, a soft Brexit is closer to Norway and that is a fundamental difference and we should resolve it before we leave. So the question right now is, do we agree to a deal that essentially leaves unresolved and therefore unclosed the fundamental question at the heart of Brexit. And the reason that she's doing this by the way is that the Cabinet, let alone the government, let alone parliament, the Cabinet is fundamentally divided on that question. So the risk for Britain is that we leave not knowing what the future relationship with Europe is, pay the money up front, become supplicants to Europe, have no negotiating leverage, and then of course it's too late to do something about it if we decide we don't like it.

AM: You sound almost like a member of the ERG in that analysis if I may say so I mean because what a lot of people will say is yes, that's all true, but no deal is so scary to us that it's worth getting this deal across the line to avoid that.

TB: Yeah, but they're completely wrong because you're perfectly able, as parliament now – if you have a delay to the process which you'll probably need in any event, you should use the delay for a

purpose. And the purpose should be to put to parliament, do you want a hard Brexit, or do you want a soft Brexit? Now I believe that when parliament's faced with that choice, 'cause a hard Brexit is painful, a soft Brexit is pointless, then they will go to another referendum.

AM: Let's come on to the referendum then, because it's clear at the moment there aren't the votes in the House of Commons for another referendum, but also have you any evidence at all that the country wants another referendum?

TB: Well I think the evidence is mixed but you can point to evidence that people want another referendum. I mean it depends what polling you look at and by the way what question you raise. But for example if you ask people – if you support her deal should it be confirmed in a referendum, there's actually quite a lot of support for that.

AM: Well let me give you Sir John Curtice who is kind of God on referendum questions and he says, 'there is little sign of any increase – recent increase - in support for a second referendum. Delatapoll and they're using a new poll, say 43% are in favour, 45% opposed and opinion figures are even more against a second referendum.' So the country doesn't want it, parliament doesn't want it. Isn't it time to give up on it?

TB: When you say the country doesn't want it and 43%-45 I mean that's pretty even Stevens. But the question for parliament is what's the right thing to do? And the risk of her deal is we're going to leave in circumstances where we don't know what we're getting. Now by the way, Theresa May promised continually, if you remember, we would know in sufficient detail the future relationship with Europe so that we could make a decision. Because she can't get agreement in the Cabinet, for example Liam Fox, you're about to interview. Liam's in favour of a hard Brexit. He's in favour of a Canada style free trade agreement. Amber Rudd, Philip Hammond –

AM: Not so much.

TB: Well, opposed to it and in favour of a Norway style agreement. This is a fundamental question. You've got to resolve it before you leave.

AM; Before we move onto other things, let's just finish with the referendum because there's an awful lot of Labour MPs will not vote for a second referendum. 40-60 by some accounts. Caroline Flint who was a minister in your government says: 'There are Labour MPs like me who will not support a second referendum. We can't ignore millions of Labour Leave voters. There are people on the Remain and Leave side for whom no deal will ever be good enough. The time has come to recognise that the decision to Leave has been made by the British people. Everyone needs to show compromise.' Why is she wrong?

TB: Okay, let me explain why I think she's wrong, although I have a great respect for Caroline. First of all just on the pure politics of it, I think there's very good evidence that a majority of Labour voters want to remain and actually want another referendum. But leave that to one side. What Caroline wants is a soft Brexit. She wants Britain to remain permanently in a customs union. But the problem is those people driving policy in the Conservative Party they don't want that. So that's why if I was her, what I would say, keep to your position of a soft Brexit, but demand that you settle that issue, soft versus hard, before you leave.

AM: So in short your message to Labour MPs is whatever you do vote against Theresa May's deal?

TB: Vote against the deal, use an extension to come to a conclusion, hard versus soft or back to the people and I think you will get to another referendum when people understand that a hard Brexit is going to be deeply economically painful for the country and a soft Brexit means that we just become a rule taker. It's in those circumstances that I think you mobilise a majority in parliament to say look, the sensible thing in these circumstances is

to put it back to the people. Or, by the way, pass her deal, subject to a confirmatory referendum.

AM: If there is a delay how long how should it be for?

TB: So, I think if it's a purely technical delay it doesn't need to be very long. I think it should be a delay long enough to give us time to make up our minds.

AM: If the EU come back and say two years, that's the kind of delay that you'd accept?

TB: No. I think you could have a delay by the way – I think even if you had a short delay it's perfectly possible to put a set of votes to the House of Commons that says do you want a hard Brexit, a soft Brexit, back to the people. We know what these things mean by the way. You know, it's not as if we don't know what a hard Brexit looks like or what a soft Brexit looks like. And as I say, the only reason we're not deciding that now is because Theresa May knows if she puts that to parliament she'll have a split within her Cabinet.

AM: Did you speak to any of the MPs who broke away to form The Independent Group before they left?

TB: I didn't. I mean I - I mean I've spoken to them many, many times obviously, but speaking about breaking away, no.

AM: Have you spoken to them afterwards?

TB: I'm in touch with them and I have spoken to some of them. And look, I've got a great deal of sympathy with what they're doing and what they're saying. And it's a fundamental question –

AM: To put it simply, do you back what they've done?

TB: I'm staying in the Labour Party. You know I've been in the Labour Party for over 40 years. I led it for 13 years. I was the longest serving Labour Prime Minister. You know I'm – you know I'm deeply attached to the Labour Party, but do I sympathise with what they have done? Yes, I do. I think they're courageous in having done it. But I think there's a really fundamental question

for the Labour Party in all of this which is the following: I mean if both political parties stay locked in a kind of narrow lager of ideology, the Labour Party with the hard left, the Conservatives dominated by Brexit and a narrow nationalism, there is a vast empty territory that is going to be populated.

AM: And so here are people trying to populate that empty territory.

TB: Right, so they've come onto it and they will be joined by others who will migrate over time.

AM: You think others will move?

TB: I think it's absolutely inevitable, if you put the choice before the country, hard Brexit Tory party, hard left Labour Party, it doesn't matter what I say, what I want to happen, what anyone else says, you leave that amount of territory, fertile territory open, someone's going to come in and cultivate it.

AM: Because the great dilemma, the kind of moral, personal dilemma for a lot of Labour MPs now is do they stay inside the Labour Party and fight, or do they go? I'm thinking of people like Siobhain McDonagh, you know, who's one of your great supporters, a great enthusiast for your kind of politics. She said: 'I hope to remain a member of the Labour Party, but it's no longer unconditional.'

TB: Yeah, well this is the problem. I mean the thing to remember is in over a hundred years of our history in the Labour Party this leftist strain which is from the far left and whose adherence –

AM: It's very popular in the country. I mean you know they did very well in the election, then a half million members in the Labour Party.

TB: You could debate that. I'm not so sure it's that popular in the country, but supposing it is, the question's not whether actually for me whether it's popular or unpopular, the question is whether it's right or not right. And the problem is, you know, in the Labour Party we've never had that hard left strain in charge of the Labour Party. So when people compare what's happening with the so-called TIGers and the Labour Party in the 80s, back then - you know when I first met Michael Foot I was the junior lawyer for the Labour Party, Michael was my client and we were expelling Militant, right. And the leadership of the Labour Party was on an often inadequate but reasonably steady process of modernisation. Unfortunately today the leadership of the Labour Party is as it were, the problems derive from their attitude.

AM: The problem is you say, I'm going to stay inside the Labour Party presumably to reform the Labour Party and move it back to your kind of politics. I just put it to you that that is not going to happen. It is a forlorn hope. Jon Lansman, the founder of Momentum, who knows about these things says: 'Tony Blair was never in the right party and there will never be a return to his politics in Labour.' And looking at the way the rules have changed, looking at the way the Party's organised, he's probably right.

TB: He may be right but I hope he isn't, and by the way, you know, there was a point in time when these guys were on the defensive. Okay, they're in charge of the Labour Party at the moment, but in the end it's a question of you know, is it possible to bring the Labour Party back? And I think it - I hope it is. I'm not sure it is.

AM: So your message is, stay and fight?

TB: My message to people at the moment is, you know I can only tell them what I'm doing. I am staying in the Labour Party. Am I deeply concerned about the Labour Party, its direction, its policy?

Yes, I am. And that's why I'm saying to the Labour Party you know, someone who led it to three election victories, guys if you want to get back to winning ways this is not the position to be in.

AM: Strange days when I quote Tom Watson to you, but Tom Watson is now setting up a Social Democratic Group inside the Labour Party. When you were Prime Minister if John Prescott for whom you had agreements and disagreements, if he had set up a group inside the party you'd have fired him, wouldn't you?

It's impossible for Jeremy Corbyn to do the job when this kind of thing is going on.

TB: You know, I've just come to the conclusion about modern politics that's nothing's predictable. I mean in how many circumstances can you say about either political party, main political party at the moment, well that would never have happened a few years back? So I think we are in new times. Look, what Tom is – I think Tom has actually shown really great leadership actually for the Labour Party over these past weeks and I think as a result of what he's doing, he's actually encouraging people who do share a perspective of the Labour Party as a governing modern progressive party, you know, he's actually encouraging them in a sense to stay because he's providing a sort of space –

AM: A party within a party some would say.

TB: Well he's providing a space within which people can debate and argue, because the other thing that I think whether it's with the TIGers or with today's Labour Party, the other thing is to debate policy. I mean I've said this to you before. The single greatest thing that's happening in this country, or will happen in the next few years, as with every modern developed country is the technological revolution. It's going to change everything. We've

got to be the masters of this and there's no debate going on in the Labour Party at the moment about it.

AM: There isn't. In these wild, unpredictable times with Brexit, do you think we are seeing a fracturing or a breaking of the old party system?

TB: We could be, yes. Because I think in the end, as I say, it's very, very simple and what the TIGers - what this Independent Group has done is show both main parties there's a limit to their self-indulgence. So if the Labour Party wants to carry on inhabiting that far left territory and the Tories want to carry on playing around with this hard Brexit and narrow nationalism, you are going to have a situation in which the party system breaks up. Now it may be that the Tory party returns to sense and maybe the Labour party returns to sense, but one way or another you're not going to have all those homeless people without a home to go to.

AM: Tony Blair, thanks very much for talking to us.

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