AM: [PROGRAMME CUE]: We haven't heard much from Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, since he quit number 10. He's been working on aid issues, but chose to live well away from the metropolis, back in his old constituency in Fife. When we met this week, I started by asking him whether living so far from London had changed his political perspective in any way.

(INTERVIEW BEGINS)

GB: Well, it’s – it’s good for my family. My children are at school there, enjoying it very much. And I’m back where I started as a – in the constituency where I was a Member of Parliament, and it’s great to be home with people that, you know and have grown up with. I think it makes you more aware that there’s a very London-centric view of the world, and if you go round Scotland, but also I’ve been in the Midlands this week, I’ve been in Cardiff last weekend, and if you go round the outlying parts of the country or outlying from London I think there is a very strong sense of – of distance. People feel that they’re not listened to, I think people feel that too many policies are London-centric, and if we made mistakes by being too London-centric, then I think we should recognise that. And I do believe that we are a divided country, and that – that I’m afraid is what I’ve noticed as I’ve gone round Britain these last two years. Possibly more divided now than at the time of the referendum, which was itself a very divisive event.

AM: And you’ve produced what looks like a kind of manifesto to heal some of those divisions.

GB: It’s not a manifesto. It’s – it’s ideas. I’m – I’m standing back from main- mainstream – I wouldn’t actually call myself a politician now because I’m no longer representing people in
parliament. But – but I do sense that there are things that could be done better.

AM: That could be done but aren’t being. And I want to go through some of the things you’ve been saying about that, but before we do, this week we have a series of really, really big votes on Brexit, with the customs union and a substantial vote and so forth. Can I ask you do you think that it is possible for this country to remain in a customs union with the EU having left the EU?

GB: I think it is. But – but I think the issue that we’ve got to resolve is Northern Ireland. I mean, it is absolutely clear to me that if you want a frictionless border between the north and the south, and everybody says that that is what they want, then you’ve not only got to adhere to some form of customs union or partnership, you’ve also got to adopt some of the single market regulations. And therefore this is an issue that I think people have avoided for – for too long.

AM: But don’t you accept that a lot of people watching will feel that if we are effectively still inside the customs union and very close to the single market or part of it, that is a betrayal of the Brexit vote?

GB: No, I don’t think it would be. I – I think, you – you know, I’ve been looking at the polls round the – the country and looking at what people are saying, and I think what’s not really being picked up is that none of the options that the government are putting forward at the moment are seen as satisfactory to people. They don’t like the options that the hard Brexiteers are putting forward. They do want, I think, to protect our manufacturing industry and they do – people want to be careful about what’s a threat to jobs. I think there is an issue also about just maintaining our trading links and therefore –
AM: But we have voted to leave.

GB: We’ve voted to leave the European Union as a political union, but look, Westminster can deal with the issues. I – I – I –

AM: Don’t you think - I’m sorry –
GB: I want to stand back and say, look, what is driving the dissatisfaction? Because you will find that many of the issues are not related to the technical details of Brexit, they’re actually about lost jobs, they’re about wages being stagnant, they’re about communities feeling left out, they’re about the health service, actually –

AM: It was a major revolt against the political –

GB: Exactly. Exactly.

AM: - as such.

GB: And you’ve got to listen and you’ve got to respect it. And then you’ve got to ask: what do you do about it? And I think people expect us to do something about our industry and lost jobs. I think that they expect us to do something about stagnant wages, about left-out communities. But I don’t know if people thought when they were voting on the technicalities of this or that.

AM: If the government is defeated this week in the House of Commons, Theresa May does not have a proposal she can take to the EU, and we are very close to some kind of breakthrough moment in this whole Brexit story. And you have talked about there being a game changer. You said there’d be a game changer this summer, you thought, which would change everything.

GB: Well, I –
AM: Has that game changer arrived and what would it be?

GB: Well, I think the customs union vote is difficult for – for the – the Brexiteers. And I think also that her proposal, which I understand is being floated over the course of the last few days, that there would be a longer transition period, that would mean effectively that we were in the customs union till 2023, as far as I understand it, beyond the next general election and therefore Europe would become the issue of the next general election. So I think all these things are still in the air. But certainly there are two moments of decision in the next few months. One on the customs union, and one on what’s called the meaningful vote as to whether when you get the final terms of negotiation –

AM: MPs can –

GB: MPs can actually both reject it and perhaps offer an alternative or even discuss another way of consulting the country. Now, the point, however, I would make is that I’m not involved in that day to day business. I want to stand back and say: look, what have you got to do fundamentally to deal with the grievances that produced this political earthquake and make people understand that we have to unite as a country around common ground, and we’ve got to find that common ground.

AM: But we have to deal with the Brexit thing first in the sense that –

GB: Of course.

AM: - your – you don’t like it being called a manifesto, your suggestions, put it that way, seem very much about Britain still inside, in some way, the EU and how you then heal the division that caused the original vote. But before we get there we have to
deal with this thing. If the government loses on – on the customs union, if we’re in real political crisis, is that in your view, the moment that we can start to talk about a second vote for everybody?

GB: I think what will happen if the government loses the vote that there is potentially the chance of a change of Prime Minister, but I don’t think at that point they will want to give up as a government, and I think the five-year parliament makes it possible for them to survive. So I – I think the – the issues come back to whether the meaningful vote after the customs union vote, the meaningful vote, means that parliament rejects or potentially could reject the whole settlement, and that – that’s the point, that’s the point of further crisis.

AM: That’s another crisis. Okay. Now, you’ve talked about all the underlying reasons for the original Brexit vote, and one of the things you talked about was immigration. And I guess people watching might think well, that’s a bit rich, because that really big rise in immigration from the accession EU countries took place during the Blair-Brown years, and that in a sense was where the kind of euroscepticism, always in the body politic, was kind of supercharged.

GB: Well, I’ve actually looked at the figures, and that’s not actually the case. The biggest Romanian and Bulgarian push was after 2010. But I accept that we did not understand the – the fears and concerns that people would have about the levels of migration in the country. But what I find really interesting now is that since 2016, almost new developments since the referendum, that in France, in Germany, in Belgium and in Switzerland which is under freedom of movement, they’re making big changes. And so you’ve got to register jobs in Switzerland now. You’ve got to register as workers if you’re a migrant in Germany. You can be
removed from the country in Belgium if you don’t have a job after five months.

AM: They’re doing all the things we didn’t do, in a sense.

GB: Yes. And – and these are things that could be done today. So – so the European Union could not prevent us doing these things, these things could be done today. Just last week the European Parliament and France pushing for it, said that you could not undercut the wages of British or French or whatever workers by paying them Latvian or – or eastern European wages in their country. And that’s now a law within Europe. So there are things we can do that would actually unite opinion in this country.

AM: Another of the things that you were talking about earlier on was the National Health Service. Now, you famously raised National Insurance by a penny, it was actually quite a popular tax rise, to bring more money into the NHS and funding was going up by about five per cent year on year during the Blair and Brown years. And we’re now in the situation where the government seem to be talking about a rise of maybe three per cent, and the Labour Party is not much further forward than that. Do we need a bigger rise? Do we need to get back to the four to five per cent rises to save the NHS?

GB: I – I think if we don’t do something now we’ll have to do even more later. So the case for doing something now is – is very strong. And I think you’re talking about three, four, five per cent increases per year. I think you do have to repeat the rise in National Insurance and I think you –

AM: Is that you’re fa- favoured way of paying for this?

GB: Well, I think it’s fairer. I think people would be prepared to pay it. I think it’s essentially hypothecated and therefore people
can see the money is actually going to the National Health Service. So if I was doing this I’d say first of all is there any alternative, and I think we’d find there is no alternative but to finding more resources, because - even although there’s a lot of changes we could make. I think secondly, are people prepared to accept it? Yes, if they see the money is directly going into the health service. You can’t just impose this without thinking about it, you’ve got to go out and persuade people and show people that there is not better alternative than actually to put that money into healthcare, because if we don’t do that –

AM: Because – the current Labour proposal is – is to tax the top five per cent to pay for it.

GB: Yes, the current Labour proposal is something that I supported in the – the manifesto and I think you will probably have to combine that with a – a National Insurance rise.

AM: You’ve also talked about wage compression, people feeling up and down the country that, as it were, capitalism has simply not worked for them or their communities. Do you regret, when you were Prime Minister, not basically taking Britain a little bit more to the left than you did and going back to the old Gordon Brown radicalism, before you were Chancellor, before you were Prime Minister?

GB: Right, you just talked about the biggest tax rise in – for a single thing in history –

AM: There was that, yeah.

GB: - so that was progressive. And we did a number of things that were extremely progressive.
GORDON BROWN

AM: I’m thinking more generally about the relationship between the government and global capitalism.

GB: One of my huge regrets is that we had proposals to reform the global financial system that we were pushing forward after we’d got the country out of recession in 2009, we had this big agenda for transforming the international financial system. My fear is that we will find ourselves in a crisis in a year or two from now, people will ask: why didn’t you make these changes when you had the chance to do so? And the chance was there. I’m afraid we didn’t stay in power longer enough to do it, but it should have been done. So the global financial system as a whole is in need of fundamental reform. I’ll tell you this. If the last crisis came out of America with subprime mortgages it could equally well come out of Asia with commercial lending. You can see all the problems, shadow banking, and we will ask ourselves: why did we not act on that?

AM: And this is why John McDonnell is now talking about overthrowing capitalism, the entire system doesn’t work. You never went that far, do you not regret that?

GB: No, because I’m talking about managing globalisation in the interests of the people of the world and the people of our country. You see there are –

AM: Isn’t he right to talk about overthrowing a system that’s not working?

GB: Hold on, hold on. There’s an open ended globalisation that I never supported. I always said we to managed globalise – It wasn’t whether we had it or not it was whether we managed it well or badly. And then there’s an anti-globalisation movement which say there’s nothing we can do with the whole system, you
can't do anything except overthrow it. I think it’s about managing –

AM: What’s wrong with the second bit?

GB: Because a) it doesn’t work. You’ve got to manage globalisation well and that demands not just – and this is the irony of the situation, people’s rebellion against globalisation is expressed in nationalism and protectionism, but you cannot manage globalisation without international cooperation.

AM: You’ve been very respectful of Jeremy Corbyn, you’ve called him a phenomenon, and you said that you regret you couldn’t reach younger voters in the way he did. You know it’s not the beard and it’s not the shell-suit I suspect, it’s the fact that he is more radical in policy terms and that is really resonating with younger voters in this country.

GB: Well, Jeremy is a phenomenon and he is reflecting people’s concerns about a whole range of issues, some of which I’m myself raising in the speeches I’m making. But you know we go through phrases in politics. Look, in 2002 we persuaded people of the need for a tax rise.

AM: Is he a phase?

GB: Well, everything’s a phase. I mean Jeremy himself is going to accept that he – nobody goes on forever. We’re all phases, we’re all sort of part of it. Politicians have a short shelf life actually in terms of life at the top. I happen to have been Prime Minister when people were resisting some of the proposals that we thought were necessary for the economy. I think there is a new opportunity to do things that are more progressive now because people have seen the failure of austerity.
AM: Since then we’ve had Brexit, we’ve had the Conservative government, we’ve had coalition government. Do you accept that at a crucial period New Labour became too metropolitan and did lose touch with the rest of the country?

GB: Well I don’t think I was ever that metropolitan myself, but I do think that again politics is, is - you go through these cycles and you’ve got to understand. You come in and there’s a wave of support for taking action. The health service has been underfunded, education is underfunded, inequality, you’ve got to address that. And then the wave moves in another direction and you’ve got to understand that the public have got to be persuaded all the time. You cannot just relax and be complacent, you’ve got to get out there and persuade people all the time.

AM: This is a slightly strange conversation, if I may, because you have got the passion, you’ve got the ideas, you sound like somebody still absolutely in the game. But you say, no, no, no, I’m not a politician. For your ideas to be translated into actual facts something needs to change, are you completely out of the game really?

GB: Yes.

AM: Really?

GB: Yes, Andrew because I’ve learnt something.

AM: Don’t sound like it.

GB: Well I’ve learned something, that you’ve got a shelf life. I mean look, people get fed up with you. It’s a 24 hour cycle, they see you all the time, they see all your frailties, they see all your weaknesses as well as perhaps some of your strengths, but they get fed up. They’ve had enough. And I don’t think, I’ll be honest,
that there will be many politicians that will be at the top for the kind of numbers of years that Margaret Thatcher and Tony were at the top. I think you’ll find that there is a far faster turnover of politicians simply because the 24 hour news cycle exposes people to so much criticism, but also people see and get bored and I think – you, you could go on forever, Andrew –

AM: Well thank you. I’m delighted to hear it.

GB: - you can interview all the people but this is a revolving door.
AM: A revolving door.

GB: And I accept therefore that the shelf life of people like me was limited.

AM: You mentioned Tony there. Are you back on terms? If he called up and said: I know this great little Italian restaurant, let’s have supper sometime Gordon. Would you say yes?

GB: Oh I think I’m actually doing something with him in about two weeks from now, so we keep in touch, and you know you go through all these events and crises and you’ve got to stand back sometimes and say, you know, here are people who worked together, people who were friends, people that have done things together, sometimes disagreed but disagreed probably out of principle and not out of anything else.

AM: Gordon Brown, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

GB: Thank you.

Ends