ANDREW MARR – TONY BLAIR, 19TH SEPTEMBER, 2017

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TONY BLAIR

AM: As we’ve heard the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, believes the EU could still adjust free movement of people in such a way that Britain could then remain inside the EU and he’s also admitted that the policy of open borders, he so enthusiastically pursued in government, is no longer appropriate. But whatever its flaws or merits isn’t this, as we’ve just heard, an idea that has simply come too late? Mr Blair joins me now.

AM: And I guess we could start with that. It’s an interesting idea but there are numerous hurdles, not least that we have now voted to leave the EU and that is that.

TB: Yeah, and I completely understand that and what Michael Fallon’s just said to you now is a perfectly sensible view. It’s to say look, the British people have taken this decision and therefore there’s no way out of it. What I’m trying to say is - and you can see this in some what he was saying to you – this decision is life changing for this country and this is a moment when every Member of Parliament, including the people like Michael Fallon who frankly believed that Britain’s better off in Europe and not out of it, have got to see if there is a way of meeting people’s legitimate grievances and anxieties that gave rise to that Brexit vote, but do it in a way that doesn’t undermine the economy of the society and the country and its standing in the world. So what I’m trying to do with this immigration paper that my Institute’s published today is have a comprehensive look at European immigration, say there are ways of controlling European immigration that don’t mean you have to do Brexit and then by the way you can concentrate on non-EU immigration, which I think is actually a bigger concern for most people.
AM: Okay, and a lot of people already this morning have said it’s a little bit rich coming from you given how you opened the doors back in the 2000s to mass immigration and changed lots of communities.

TB: Right, so first of all we shouldn’t exaggerate this by the way. In 2004 we could have imposed transitional arrangements on those accession countries - the 8 countries. Actually the majority of EU migration since 2004 has been from outside of those countries and we would still have had freedom of movement if not freedom to work. But the real point is the situation back then was different. Look, when I left office in 2007 the economy was strong, there was no National Health Service winter crisis, the health service satisfaction levels were at record point. Educational attainment was rising, crime was falling, inequality was narrowing. 2017, post financial crisis, post austerity, no you’ve got to listen to what people are saying and react to it.

AM: But we did have hundreds of thousands of people coming into this country after that decision quite quickly and lots of communities up and down the country, all up and down the east coast for instance, parts of the midlands and the black country, were changed very, very fast and people didn’t understand that and the question I suppose is do you accept among all the reasons for the Brexit vote that was part of it?

TB: I accept that EU migration, including from those accession countries was obviously a factor. I do think it probably isn’t the biggest concern on immigration, but here’s what I’m saying now, because we’re not 13 years ago, we’re 2017, the circumstances are completely different and we’ve had the Brexit vote. If for example the anxiety is, pressure on – downward pressure on wages as a result of an influx of EU migrants coming and doing work say in the construction industry -

AM: Wage compression -
TB: We have it within our power to deal with that by domestic legislation. In addition, for example, now there is a directive being supported by the French President who would specifically bar the undercutting of wages and local bargaining from EU migration. So if we want to deal with those questions we can deal with them without the sledgehammer that as it were through Brexit destroys the EU migration that we’ll actually need, because my paper shows that we actually need most of those EU migrants, and it doesn’t of course deal with the other parts of the immigration issue which I think are the greater concern.

AM: But nonetheless the British people voted to take back control of their borders, so any change in internal EU migration would have to be quite a dramatic one. Can I ask you whether you see any sign whatever that any of the leaders of the EU, or the national leaders, are prepared to revisit what is one of the four pillars of the EU free movement?

TB: I think there are signs and I’ve just given you one which is specifically dealing with this issue of undercutting of wages. I think you could go back and argue in Europe today for example an emergency brake that didn’t just deal with benefits but also deal with the influx of people, and I think there are things that we could do domestically like registering people who’ve come in and those that go out. I think you could probably get a restriction on those that come –

AM: We tried to do this in 2016 under David Cameron and failed.

TB: Right, but is post the Brexit vote. And the thing that I am saying is that, you know, at the moment you either do leave, Brexit, as Michael Fallon’s just been saying to you, even though does he really think it’s a smart thing to do? No, he doesn’t but he feels he has to. Or we have the status quo. I’m trying to say this: in the end Brexit is a distraction not a solution to the problems this country faces. If Members of Parliament really believe that then their obligation is to set out solutions that deal with the actual
problems communities and people have and not do Brexit, which is actually going to distract us from those solutions and going to cause real economic and political damage.

AM: When you observe these negotiations, which are not going terribly smoothly at the moment, and you’ve been to see Mr Juncker and warmly embraced him and so forth, whose side are you on?

TB: I’m always on the side of Britain. But the question is what’s in the British interest? And in my view –

AM: Have you offered any advice or help to the Brexit team on the British side?

TB: No, but I’m very happy to but they probably wouldn’t want my advice because what I would be saying to them is enlarge the options. Look, just understand what the problem of Europe is with the British position, because it’s really important people understand this. For over three decades British governments under Margaret Thatcher, under John Major, under me have been arguing two great causes in Europe. One is the single market. Make Europe not a federal super state but a bigger economic market, bring more prosperity to European people, and the other is enlargement of the European Union. You’ve just been talking to Michael Fallon, Jens Stoltenberg about the dangers of Russia. Think if we hadn’t brought those East European countries into the European Union. So these are the two big causes for 30 years Britain’s fought for. They’re now the reasons apparently we want to leave.

AM: And we have decided to leave, that is the thing I keep coming back to. We have taken the decision, the vote’s been had, it was a democratic vote, there was more than a million people in the majority and that is going to happen unless something really dramatic changes and I want to take you onto how you could get the second referendum that I think you want. Because you look at
the House of Commons and you ask: ‘which of the parties is going to call for a second referendum?’ And you look around scratching your head in vain.

TB: Yeah, so here’s the thing that I think each Member of Parliament’s got to do at the moment. Is to look at this decision in a different category from the normal decision where you obey the party whip or you know any ordinary piece of legislation. This is a decision that really changes the destiny of this country for generations.

AM: You’re saying go out and rebel for Britain?

TB: No, no, I’m saying this: I’m saying if you believe there is a better way through, and I’m trying to suggest and will publish more papers over the next months, there are better ways of dealing with the country’s problems than Brexit, then at least try and explain that to the country. Find the leadership within yourself to say to people there is a different and better way. Now if the country doesn’t change its mind - I’ve always accepted if there isn’t a change then Brexit will go forward. What I’m saying to those in positions of political leadership and those members of Parliament at the moment is guys, this is not an ordinary decision, so make this one where you’re prepared to go out and if you think that there is a different and better way put it before people and argue for it.

AM: But I’m interested in what actually is going to happen. How you achieve this. Now Lord Adonis, Andrew Adonis a former close colleague of yours suggests today that the House of Lords could have an amendment to this legislation saying it can’t go ahead in the end without a second referendum and that would then come to the House of Commons. Now in those circumstances if that really what you’re calling for, is members of the House of Commons to vote for a second referendum?
TB: No, I’m calling for something prior to that, because before you get to that – this thing will go ahead unless it starts to become obvious that the public is having second thoughts. That when they see what leaving the single market and customs union means that they start to say well actually it hasn’t –

AM: It hasn’t become obvious yet, has it?

TB: No, it hasn’t become obvious yet. But, maybe if we who are in politics, either in parliament or outside of parliament, put this case to people maybe they will listen. If they don’t I accept it goes forward. But here’s the other thing we’ve got to remember about the referendum. We voted for Brexit without knowing what the terms of the alternative relationship are.

AM: There was no way of knowing what the alternatives were really.

TB: Exactly, there’s no way of knowing and we’ve learnt a lot since then. My point again is very simple. As the Government comes to look at the terms of Brexit surely it’s a very common sense thing to say that we take our final irrevocable decision once we see what the alternative is. Because you know, to use the old house swap analogy, we agreed to swap our house but we haven’t yet seen what the other place looks like. If when we see it the country has a change of mind then surely it’s entitled to have that change of mind.

AM: Except that we have signed the contract which was Article 50, so in terms of the house buying thing the deal is going through at the moment. Now can I ask you about –

TB: Yeah but we’re not actually – we’ve not looked at the alternative terms and by the way let’s be very clear, Brexit in my view is very, very damaging for Britain, it’s damaging for Europe. If you look at all these –

AM: But if your immigration plan, your alternative offer on immigration is to actually happen then the EU has effectively to
come to us and say we have got this great new idea which might keep you in. And there is no sign of that whatever. In fact Macron and Merkel have both said the four pillars are sacrosanct, we’re not going to touch them, don’t even think about it.

TB: Yeah, but what they’re saying is you shouldn’t abandon freedom of movement and you shouldn’t, by the way, ‘cause it actually has a beneficial impact. You can restrict it and you can qualify it and this is not just a question of Europe coming to us. Again, as I say, if we had sensible political leadership right now we would also be going to Europe and saying here are a range of different options, so let’s investigate each one of them. And the whole purpose of this is to be in a situation where if for example the country then finally decides that we want to do this, it’s important than anything else, fine, there’s nothing I or anyone else can do. I’m just in a sense with a renewed sense of mission on this because I think for future generations this is a decision of such moment and importance that we’ve at least got to be prepared to argue the case.

AM: Not a renewed sense of mission, please! Anyway, let me ask you about another thing you say in this article, again and again you say that there are senior doubters inside the government. Now we know that Phillip Hammond and others have not been enthusiastic about Brexit, but you are implying that there are actually Brexiteers who have changed their mind as they’ve seen the way the negotiations are going.

TB: Well, I think there may or not be that. No I was meaning more the people who voted remain and are now, as Michael Fallon’s just been saying to you, we’ve got no option. We’re just bound, we’ve got to carry on. What I’m saying to them is look, if there’s a different and better way that you can meet people’s concerns, particularly on the issue of immigration, as I say ‘cause Brexit only effects EU immigration, it doesn’t affect the rest of the
immigration picture. If there’s a different and better way articulate it, argue for it.

AM: None of us are pitch perfect soothsayers. Is it possible that Brexit might work very well for this country?

TB: You see I think the only circumstances in which Brexit works – and this is the fantasy of the real Brexiteers. They are in one sense right. That if you leave Europe Britain should become a light touch, light regulation, it should become marketed –

AM: Join NAFTA.

TB: Right, it should become marketed as not Europe. The risk is the British people won’t vote for that. They’re not going to vote for the huge economic and social restructuring to the changes to the health service and other things that that would require. And the risk is actually that we have a Brexit followed by I’m afraid an unreconstructed leftist programme from Labour and if you combine those two things together in my view we will be in a very serious situation as a country. And therefore this is why this is not just about Brexit by the way, it’s about how does the centre ground of British politics recover its traction and show that there is a change that we can make to our country that really deals with its problems and doesn’t go down the false path of either old fashioned programmes of left or right.

AM: And yet like many people you were completely wrong about Jeremy Corbyn. You said that if he was elected as Labour leader there would be a meltdown, a catastrophe for the Labour Party. In fact he turned out to be very, very popular and won nearly as many votes, dare I say so, as you did in your first campaign.

TB: Yeah, and you know again what I’ve said to people is I take my hat off to the way he fought the campaign and the enthusiasm he generated, but it doesn’t make that programme right. And you know I still think there are many millions of people in the county
who want a way forward that makes the changes that make our
country fairer, that gives a heightened degree of support for social
justice and for greater social cohesion but does so in a way that is
modern and progressive and not backward looking either by going
anti-immigrant on the right or anti-business on the left.

AM: Before the summer break there was a lot of talk about a new
political party to represent those kind of centre outward looking
values you’re talking about. Is that now for the birds? Is it gone
that idea?

TB: Well, look, I’ve never been wanting a new political party, I
want the Labour Party to come back to a position where I think it
can win an election.

AM: It aint going to. It’s not going to is it?

TB: Well, at the moment it doesn’t look like it.

AM: And therefore?

TB: But it doesn’t really matter what I say or what anyone else
says I can just tell you this, there is a huge amount of political
energy out there in the country that is searching for a home. Now
if the two main parties don’t give it a home it’s going to search for
a different home. It doesn’t matter what I say or what anyone else
says.

AM: But somebody will create a new party to channel that energy?

TB: I honestly don’t know.

AM: Because if they don’t all of this is with respect, meaningless
isn’t it?

TB: Well.
AM: People have to vote for something.

TB: In the end yes they do have to vote for something but the one thing I would say about present day politics and you know as I always say to people I’m a student of politics again ‘cause you know I accept there are things that I’ve not understood about the current situation politically, but the volatility of politics is its principle characteristic at the moment and you know, yes we had Donald Trump and we have Brexit but we also had Macron in France.

AM: And just going back to Corbyn who you said it would be a disastrous programme, he has picked up on a huge amount of anger which is real. Lots and lots of people have seen their incomes going down, lots of young people see nowhere to live and see no prospect of hope for themselves, there is a lot of anger in this country about the effect of what call neo-liberal economics which happened on your watch as well.

TB: Yeah. So if you combine Brexit with the Corbyn programme, unreconstructed, then I think we’ve got a serious problem as I’ve said before. Yes, there’s a lot of anger, but give people an answer. So there are answers to the anger, there are answers on tuition fees, on social injustice, on communities left behind. You know, what should we be dealing with as a country today? The technological revolution, infrastructure, making sure that we’re geared up to the enormous changes that are coming down the pipe at us. Brexit on the one side, anti business old fashioned leftist programmes on the other. They may ride the anger but they don’t provide the answer.

AM: A very geared up Tony Blair. We’ve run out of time, thank you very much indeed.

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