AM: Delusional, say his critics, Brave and right say his supporters. Tony Blair delivered his most outspoken political intervention since leaving office this week with his call to pro Europeans to rise up against Brexit. Who better to discuss this than his old political ally Peter Mandelson, now observing the scene from the House of Lords.

AM: Peter Mandelson, Brexit is going to happen, isn’t it?
M: The question Andrew is, on what terms? And what we’ve learned since the referendum and obviously the government has to respect, and parliament has to respect the decision, the majority decision expressed in the referendum, even though it represented only 37 per cent of the public who voted to leave. What’s changed is the government’s decision about the terms on which we are going to leave the European Union. And in her speech at Lancaster House, Mrs May made clear that we weren’t just going to leave the European Union, but we were going to leave every single bit of the single market, the customs union, and that, in my view, is going to have a profound impact on our trade in Europe which is our biggest export market. And there are many people who voted to remain the referendum but I think many people who voted to leave but are now wondering about the terms on which this is going to happen who want to have their voices heard again.

AM: At the moment the 48 per cent has come down to 42 per cent supporting remain. Actually remain is moving backwards, not forwards. But even if that changes –
M: No Andrew, I’m sorry. Other opinion polls say – no, no, other opinion polls say that many leave supporters who voted that way in the referendum do not want a hard Brexit.
AM; Are having colly wobbles.
M: Well they’re having colly wobbles and that needs to be reflected by parliament.

AM: right, so the real question is Tony Blair says rise up, we can stop Brexit. It doesn’t need to happen. And my question is how will that happen, because there is a big parliamentary majority for Brexit, Theresa May had a bigger majority for triggering Article 50 than her nominal majority by some way, and as I say in the polls, certainly some of the polls in the country people are moving the other way, so I just don’t see how this rising up is going to happen.

M: Well the reason why Open Britain, the campaigning organisation with which I’m associated, along with others, asked Mr Blair to make this speech and the reason why we asked him to make it last week before the Brexit legislation goes to the House of Lords for debate tomorrow and Tuesday, is because we firmly believe that many people voted in the referendum had no idea of the terms on which the government would decide to leave the European Union. Now that is the big change in circumstances and there are many people, many people across the country, people who don’t have an extreme view one way or another, they’re not extreme pro Brexit, they’re not extreme anti-Brexit, they’re sort of not extreme left or extreme right, but they feel that they are being bulldozed. They feel that their voices are not being heard or expressed in parliament and what we’re saying is, you know, sign up to Open Britain, and many have, give us some money, which many people are doing and help us campaign against this Brexit at all costs which the government are determined to see through.

AM: I’m still not really clear what people can do. They can sign up but in the end this is a political question which depends on votes in the country and in the House of Commons.

M: Yes, it does.
AM: Tony Blair has talked about breaking the bounds of parties, having some kind of cross party movement. That somehow politics has been so radically shifted by the Brexit vote we need a new structure.

M: But what alternative do people have?
AM: That’s my question.

M: I mean if you look at what happened in the House of Commons the Supreme Court said, parliament must decide. The government used their majority to bulldoze the legislation –
AM: With a lot of help from the Labour Party.

M: No, I’m very sorry, I’ll come back to that in a moment if you want. To bulldoze the legislation through parliament, I hope they will not be so successful in the House of Lords, and when it came to a proposal by the Labour Party to enable parliament to come back and have a meaningful vote with a proper check and a proper balance on the outcome of the negotiation – not the result of the referendum but the outcome of the – a referendum, the government gave a verbal guarantee at first that that would happen, but wouldn’t accept an amendment to the Bill, but afterwards said ah, but this will only be a take it or leave it. You can have – you can choose between a bad deal and no deal at all and what we’re saying is that what parliament must agree is to say, look at the final deal, look at the outcome of the negotiation and if it’s not good for Britain, if it’s potentially going to be a disaster for our economy, send the government back to the negotiating table.

AM: Now you mention the House of Lords. There are two sets of amendments coming up in the House of Lords next week that seem to be relevant to this. One is the vote that you were just discussing, the vote at the end of the process, and one is to give more guaranteed rights to EU citizens in the UK. You know you’re
moving around these people all the time, is it your view the government can be defeated on both of those things?

M: I think it is. I think there’s a strong body of opinion across party and amongst the independent Peers as well that both these issues are very serious, but of course when it comes to EU citizens, you know the British government is not negotiating with itself and there will be people amongst the member states who say no, we don’t want to take this issue now, we’ll take it later on during the course of the negotiation because it’s as much a negotiating gambit for them as it is for Britain.

AM: Is for you this the overriding question now in British politics?

M: It is the overriding question because so much hinges on it, Andrew. You know –

AM: Sorry. That being so given that the only party which is clearly anti-Brexit is the Liberal Democrats shouldn’t people vote Lib Dem in the future, not Labour which is divided?

M: No. What people should be doing is putting pressure on parliamentarians from all parties trying instil a bit of courage in the Tory MPs as well, most of whom seems to have capitulated to the ideologues in their party, but yes, pressure on the Labour Party, pressure on the Liberal Democrats and the Greens to say you’ve got to speak up for us when the time comes.

AM: Let me ask you a little bit about what might happen after those Lords vote. Suppose the Lords do vote to amend the Article 50 legislation in the way that you would like to see. It then goes back to the House of Commons, presumably the May government uses their majority in the House of Commons again to send it straight back to the House of Lords. Do we then get a long period of ping pong or does the House of Lords say, well hold on a
second, the referendum was clear, the Commons is clear, we are the unelected House, it’s time to give up?

M: At the end of the day the House of Commons must prevail because it is the elected Chamber.

AM: My question is how long is the day?

M: But I hope the House of Lords will not throw in the towel early.

AM: Very good. Now this intervention by Tony Blair has been criticised by a lot of Labour MPs on two grounds –

M: Hold on. Three Labour MPs I counted in the last –

AM: Well I haven’t gone through counting them but they were pretty vehement about it and they were saying two things. One, he’s not the right guy, and frankly in a sense he and you were involved in that decision to allow the gates to open to immigration from the EU early. You are the guy who sent out search parties, as I recall, and therefore on the key question of immigration it’s the wrong people leading this charge, and secondly, just before these by-elections it’s the wrong timing.

M: Well, first of all I famously was not in the government at the time so I didn’t send search parties out anyway.

AM: It was your phrase was it not, it was your phrase?

M: But what British businesses did, given that we were operating a pretty full employment economy in 2004, was to say that you know, we need people to work in our companies, fill these job vacancies from outside the country. And here’s the point, Andrew. You know at the end of the day what we’re going to see in this negotiation is three things. We’re going to see less trade. You’re
going to see Britain paying through the nose for the access that we want and negotiate, but you’re also going to see, broadly speaking I suspect, the same numbers of migrants coming to this country as now. Partly because already half of the migrants don’t come from the European Union, they come from the rest of the world and in the case of those who come from Europe we need them to fill jobs in our economies. So let’s look at the outcome of all this –

AM: But these are the arguments, particularly in immigration –
M: Hold on a moment. We’re going to have less trade, we’re going to be paying through the nose for it and broadly speaking we’re going to have the same number of immigrants coming to the country. Now is that a reasonable deal? Don’t you think the public will have something to say about that outcome when the negotiation ends? I think they will.

AM: That is the last thing that Brexit voters in Stoke on Trent want to hear just at the moment and some of the critics in the party think Peter, what you’re really trying to do is –

M: And they’ve got to vote and they’ve got to vote –
AM: - Destabilise –
M: And they’ve got to vote against the government, they’ve got to vote against the Conservative Party in order to demonstrate that that’s not the sort of outcome that they want.

AM: And vote in favour of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party who helped trigger Article 50?

M: Well, who proposed an amendment to the House of Commons, but I’m afraid there are fewer Labour MPs than there are Conservative ones, saying that parliament should have a meaningful vote on this on at the end of the day. And that’s what I hope the House of Lords will reinstate.
AM: Now it has been said that raising this issue just helps the SNP in Scotland who are very keen to find a way to stay inside the single market and so forth and as it were, by accident perhaps that Tony Blair has given Nicola Sturgeon a great boost to which she of course replied to by saying that she agreed with his speech.

M: Well, I think that Brexit strengthens the argument of the nationalists, but that’s exactly what we warned during the referendum, but if you take the overall balance of the argument I don’t think it gives it to the nationalist, for this reason. Over five, six times more amount of trade by Scotland is with the rest of the UK, not with the European Union, and if they were to separate themselves from the UK obviously, a big question mark would be placed over that trade. How would they do it? If they’ve separated from the UK, re-entered the European Union, the rest of the UK was out of the European Union, that would have an impact on Scottish trade with the rest of the UK. And they have to take that into consideration.

AM: The estimable Tim Shipman said earlier on and has written in the papers today that six of your colleagues in the House of Lords want to give up the Labour Whip, become cross bench peers.

M: Who are they?

AM: He didn’t give me names. I asked if you were one of them, he said probably not.

M: Ah, sounds a bit like Sunday newspapers speculation to me.

AM: What would be your advice to such people?

M: Stay in the Labour Party, of course.
AM: Under all circumstances, despite your worries about the way that Jeremy Corbyn has led it over Article 50?

M: Yes, I believe that the Labour Party can recover its ground in British politics. I believe that very firmly and I work for it day in, day out. Look, the Labour Party to be successful has got to represent the broad swath of centre left opinion in this country, it’s also got to demonstrate strength, clarity. You know sureness of touch. It has to know what it stands for. You know strength versus weakness in British politics is as great a driving factor in my view as left versus right.

AM: A lot of people would say these are all very interesting arguments but they were thrashed through during the referendum campaign and your side lost and that should be it.

M: But that’s precisely the point. What we were told in the referendum campaign was that – by Boris Johnson, I remember him doing so – that if we left the European Union we could have the same trade in the single market as we have now. David Davis – now hold on a moment –

AM: I’m sorry, I asked Boris Johnson this and he did say very clearly that he thought we would leave the single market, as did Michael Gove, as did David Davis and many others.

M: Yes, but he said we would have the same trade as we have now outside the single market. David Davis said in the House of Commons the other day that out of the European Union, out of the single market, out of the customs union we would have the exact same benefits in trade as we do now. That is a fraud, a fraud! Look, I’ve been a trade minister in this country and I’ve been a trade commissioner in Europe, I’ve seen it both sides, both ends of the telescope and there is no trade agreement in the world that will give us the same benefits in trade that we have
now if we were to follow the government’s Brexit at all costs negotiation.

AM: We shall wait and see. Lord Mandelson thank very much for talking to us.

ENDS