

ANDREW MARR SHOW

TONY BLAIR, 19th March, 2017

Prime Minister, 1997-2007

Andrew Marr: Tony Blair is launching a new Policy Institute. He argues that globalisation, frankly the world we're living in right now, has produced a backlash of angry and divisive politics and he wants to do something about it. Now just saying that raises so many questions.

Mr Blair, can we start by talking about globalisation itself and many people would say that that is a series of decisions which happened at least on your watch, when it came to the deregulation of international banking and so forth, the deregulation of labour markets, mass immigration and that people are making a justified kickback to things that they find very disturbing and change that has happened in many communities simply too quickly.

Tony Blair: Yeah, and I think this is exactly the context for having the debate. So globalisation in my view is not really ultimately a decision by government, it's an unstoppable force that's driven by technology, trade, travel, migration and it's going to carry on. However, governments can respond to the stresses on it.

Andrew Marr: Can I just stop you on unstoppable. You say unstoppable. It's not an act of God, these are decisions taken by human beings and if people don't like it they can presumably at least slow it down.

Tony Blair: Yeah, absolutely. But it is a decision taken by human beings, not just governments. And this is important, because if you take a step back and look at the last 30 years of human history, actually more people have been lifted out of poverty in the

world than ever before, there have been enormous advances in the way that we live, in the way that we work, in the way that we operate, but there have also been real stresses and strains. You can see that economically, through the displacement of jobs, and you can see it culturally through anxiety over issues like immigration. Now my view very simply is this, that the best way of dealing with this and pushing back against the populism leftist or rightist, is for the centre ground to renew itself as the place where you protect people against the risks and dangers of globalisation but allow them to access the benefits. If you go into an anti-globalisation mode you will do immense damage economically and culturally.

Andrew Marr: But I think it's fair to say that you were a cheerleader for globalisation in the old days and when it came to things like the failure to regulate the banking system, when it came to opening the gates to very, very fast and very very big EU immigration, a lot of people will look you and say, that is the person responsible for a lot of the things going wrong in my life now.

Tony Blair: Right, first of all let's just deal with the financial crisis. This was a crisis in the financial markets that came about principally because as globalisation took root there were a whole lot of new financial instruments, people didn't understand their interrelationship and yes, after the financial crisis which happened worldwide, then all governments have taken steps to regulate the financial sector more effectively.

Andrew Marr: But you must have thought I wish we'd understood what was going on then.

Tony Blair: Absolutely. And if you want to pin the failure of understanding on those of us who were in power at the time, do,

but it was a global failure of understanding. It doesn't invalidate the whole of the process of global integration.

Andrew Marr: Fair enough. Can I ask you about the immigration decision which was very, very important around the Brexit vote and so forth. Did you know, as Prime Minister, when you allowed so many people to come in so quickly, a) how many people would come in and b), have any sense of the effect that would have on communities up and down the UK?

Tony Blair: No, we didn't know the numbers, but by the way it's very important to realise two things. First of all when these countries joined the European Union, and by the way very important for us that they did join the European Union. Important for our security, important for our economy. There was freedom of movement of people immediately. We could have delayed for four years their ability to come here and work. We didn't, it's true. The economy was in a completely different position in 2004, but I just point out the majority of the EU immigration came post 2008. And one of the tragedies of Brexit is that we're now in a situation where we think this enlargement of the European Union, rather like the single market now, was some sort of error. It was actually a bipartisan policy of both governments that has done great benefit to this country overall.

Andrew Marr: I'll come on to talk about Brexit in a sense, but the other thing about that whole period of as it were New Labour politics and what followed, was there was a lack of trust in politics. We saw the 2008 crash and people are still suffering hard after that, but also a whole series of scandals, weapons of mass destruction and so forth. I mean I was a journalist at the time and I felt misled by that. Do you think that your government was partly responsible for what has now been called the collapse of the centre? People don't want any more of that stuff.

Tony Blair: I mean look, we can go over the individual issues around trust and so on and we have many, many times, but I don't think that's really what has collapsed the support for the centre ground. I think the centre ground's got to be more self critical.

Andrew Marr: So why has it gone in that case?

Tony Blair: Because I think we've become manager of the status quo in circumstances where people want change, and if we don't provide the answers to the accelerating process of change then others will ride the anger that's caused by them. And so if you take the issue of immigration for example –

Andrew Marr: Just before we do I'm so sorry, but do you acknowledge that there was damage done to the body politic during your period and that people who are suspicious of the elites, the liberal elites, whatever - the metropolitan elites, are partly looking at what happened during your years in government?

Tony Blair: Yes I accept that to a degree.

Andrew Marr: You accept that?

Tony Blair: But I actually don't think - I think this is often used as a reason for advancing policies that are really nothing to do with the so called issue of elites. I mean if you take the question of Brexit, I mean frankly there are people who are elite on either side of this argument. They use the issue of elites in order to say this is why you've got to vote for this particular form of politics. Now the important thing I want to do with this Institute is to try and develop a modern policy agenda for the centre ground which can be used by people in the frontline of politics, I'm not in the frontline of politics, not going back in the frontline, but to say that here are the types of things we should be talking about. I mean

for example on jobs you know how do you deal with the new wave of technology and automation, artificial intelligence, big data? This is the real question for the British economy in the years ahead.

Andrew Marr: I want to come onto those questions but I'd like to talk a little bit more about Brexit because they say the elites and you say populism. What is wrong with populism? What do you mean by populism?

Tony Blair: There's nothing wrong with populism, provided it's giving answers. But if you take Brexit, look what is the real tragedy in Brexit? If you take the issues that are going to define this country in the future and I was just talking a moment or two ago about sort of technological change and the next generation of technology and this is directly relevant to Brexit, that's what you concentrate on. We have today fresh news that the National Health Service is teetering on the point of collapse. We're not dealing with this issue. Even if you want to deal with immigration the truth is Brexit doesn't deal with the main issue of immigration which is non-EU immigration. So my point is very simple. If you want to push back against this populism you've got to address the people with a policy agenda that convinces them you have answers to the accelerating pace of change in the future.

Andrew Marr: But a lot of the people that you say they're just the victims of populism are actually voters making completely rational decisions. They say there has been too much immigration. My community has been changed too quickly too fast, my wage rates have fallen, the differential gap in pay in this country has become too much, I want more control, I want stronger borders and this is how to get it. And that is not populism, that's a rational decision.

Tony Blair: It's a rational decision if it's true that getting out of Europe is going to solve those problems. And the issue really on Brexit is this – 'cause by the way let me make it clear. There's been a referendum, that is the will of the people. If that will does not change we'll go ahead and do Brexit. But here's the issue. If you actually analyse immigration from Europe according to government ministers we want to keep the majority of those people coming in from Europe. We want to keep the people who have come here with a job – their dependents.

Andrew Marr: So you think Brexit voters will feel let down after it happens in terms of immigration?

Tony Blair: I think you can't tell what will happen. The government has set a very, very clear test by the way. A few weeks ago in the House of Commons David Davis said that they were going to deliver a deal with, and I quote: 'exactly the same benefits as we now have from the single market and customs union.' We should hold them to that. And my view very simply, I agree at the moment this argument for many people is over, but if as you go down this path the British people realise three things, then it could change. One, that the gain is actually illusory. Two, that the pain is very substantial. And three, that the distraction of the government and the country in the meantime is enormous when there are these big real challenges on the economy in healthcare, education, immigration that aren't being dealt with.

Andrew Marr: But there isn't at the moment a mechanism for a change of heart as it were. Now you've said the people have spoken, you're not suggesting I think another referendum or are you? And how would that possible come about?

Tony Blair: No. I'm not suggesting that at this point. This will all depend frankly, on whether Members of Parliament are going back to their constituencies and they're noticing real pressure with

people saying, hang on I didn't know this is what it meant. And one of the things I've done in the last few months is talked to a range of people and if it's permissible still to talk to experts, a range of experts particularly on the trade issue, I didn't understand how complicated this is going to be. If they're going to try and deliver exactly the same benefits as we have now in the single market and customs union, this is an endeavour of unparalleled complexity and what people explain to me is that normally in trade negotiations you're talking about how you liberalise trade, right. This is about how you de-liberalise over 40 years of complex trading arrangements. Now I think when the only thing people can point to is you're going to control a section of this EU immigration as the reason why we want to do this I think it's possible. I don't put it higher than that.

Andrew Marr; That there will be a rebellion in parliament which changes direction.

Tony Blair: That people start to think is this really going to be the thing that is going to be important. And then when you look at Scotland you see another strain on the constitution of the country as a result.

Andrew Marr: You've been very, very hostile to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party but don't you acknowledge that even if, you know, Clem Attlee was leading the Labour Party at the moment he'd have had exactly the same problem over Labour voters who are pro Brexit and Labour constituencies which voted for Brexit and therefore he took the right decision in the House of Commons not to stop Article 50.

Tony Blair: I think the Labour Party should have a very, very simple position on Brexit and I really don't think it's difficult at all. I think what the Labour Party should say is we believed in remain, we still think the best thing is for Britain to be part of the

European Union. We acknowledge that people have voted against that. We acknowledge therefore the government have a mandate to negotiate Brexit, but we are going to hold them to the test that they have set and if they do not pass that test then we are going to retain the right to represent the people of this country should their will change to offer them the option of staying, particularly in a reformed Europe, which should be the other part of what the government and the opposition are doing, which is to investigate with the rest of Europe the possibilities of reform. I don't see what's difficult about that.

Andrew Marr: All right. You have launched effectively a think tank. Now there are an awful lot of people out there as you know, the 48%, the liberal minority at the moment. People in the centre ground looking and very, very confused about what to do. They don't feel they can vote for Jeremy Corbyn, they certainly don't want to vote for the Conservatives, they don't have a mechanism and you're not going to give them on.

Tony Blair: Yeah, I'm not interested in – it's not for me to start –

Andrew Marr: So what do they do?

Tony Blair: Because I think the way that this starts in my view is with ideas, and Brexit in truth is, as you rightly say in the context of the interview, it's really part of a bigger issue about globalisation and about what I think is the biggest political distinction today which is basically open minded versus closed minded in the light of globalisation. Now I think we need to focus yes on Brexit, but it's a much wider policy agenda and it's really about saying how do we make sure that these economic and cultural strains are best dealt with.

Andrew Marr: Very, very briefly, any advice for George Osborne now he's being a newspaper editor and an MP at the same time? Is it doable?

Tony Blair: Well I don't know whether having those jobs is doable or not but I think it's a great thing for the Evening Standard, why not? And he's a highly capable guy and it should make politics more interesting.

Andrew Marr: It certainly will. Tony Blair, thanks indeed for talking to us.

Ends