AM: Rory Stewart, let’s turn straight to those talks, Jeremy Corbyn’s pouring cold water on the idea of them. It appears to be the fact that they’re over. If they’re over, that whole middle ground has gone too hasn’t it?

RS: I think it’s going to be difficult if that’s true. But if you noticed, throughout that quite long interview you did with him, he never quite says it’s over. He keeps saying I want to see what the offer is. And I think that’s important, because we do in many ways agree. None of us want to remain in the European Union, none of us want a no deal Brexit, which means logically there has to be a deal. And if there’s going to be a deal the Labour and Conservative positions are about half an inch apart.

AM: So explain to us, for people watching, what the elements of this big bold new offer this morning are.

RS: So, there’s three main things that we’ve been talking to Labour about, which is where the difference has been. I mean, around workers’ rights, and part of the holdup will be around workers’ rights. The second thing is around the environment. And that actually is a really big and important move, because logically speaking, whether you’re talking about air quality or whether you’re talking about migratory birds, right, this has to be a European-wide discussion – make sense to do it European level. And the third thing is going to be about the issue of trading with Europe.

AM: Okay, and Jeremy Corbyn has said that is not enough. You’re going to have to go further as a government towards Labour if you’ve got any chance of getting this through at all.

RS: So at no stage has Jeremy Corbyn either in that interview or elsewhere, said that there’s anything else that he wants other
than, he sometimes suggests he wants a second referendum to be able to remain in the European Union. That is going beyond. But within the terms of a Brexit deal, I don’t believe there’s anything that Jeremy Corbyn or we want that’s that far apart.

AM: We don’t know what’s going to happen, there’s only opinion polls, but it seems as if your party is going to be smashed to pieces by the Brexit Party in these European elections. Why do you think that’s happening?
RS: Because this isn’t really an election, this European election, about political parties from Britain. It’s beginning to feel like a proxy for another referendum.

AM: So this is a new referendum in which the Brexit side is romping ahead.
RS: It feels as though people voting – at least people I talked to in my constituency and elsewhere – are not really seeing this as a vote on NHS or education or any of the things that you would talk about in a general election. It is an opportunity for people to restate their view on the referendum. Many of them forcibly saying we voted for Brexit and we want it done as soon as possible.

AM: Perhaps a reason might have been given by Theresa May writing in the Sunday Times this morning. She says, ‘the other parties standing in this election cannot deliver Brexit.’ That’s pretty rich. You’ve been in power all the way through and you’re nowhere near delivering Brexit. This is a Tory Party failure.
RS: You’re right. We’ve got a minority government. And although we’ve got closer and closer to getting the Brexit deal through, we haven’t managed to do it. But the answer ultimately has to lie with parliament. I mean, logically. I don’t think the – there are some people out there suggesting that somehow if they suddenly went to Brussels they’d get a completely different deal out of Brussels, and there are other people suggesting there’s this great
thing called no deal, which in fact isn’t a thing. It’s not a
destination, it’s a failure to reach a destination. So we’re in the
territory of a deal, and in the territory of a deal where we need to
focus is parliament. And particularly getting Labour votes across.
Now, maybe not, Jeremy Corbyn’s vote, but there are many other
moderate, sensible Labour MPs that we should get across.

AM: Part of the trouble may be the prime minister’s own lack of
authority, which is dissipating by the day. Let me look at your own
position. You’ve been loyal to her, her policy on Brexit. She
appoints you to her Cabinet. A really big thing to do. And the day
after you announce that you’re a candidate to succeed her. She
must have been bitterly hurt by that. Did she talk to you about it?
What did she say?
RS: I announced that before she appointed me to the Cabinet, so
I was the Minister of State for Prisons. I announced that I would
be running for the leadership two weeks before she put me in the
Cabinet.

AM: Doesn’t make it much better does it?
RS: Well, so the prime minister put me in the Cabinet
understanding that I said that I would want to be a leadership
candidate. And I have such enormous admiration for her, I feel
my loyalty to her is really important. But she said that she’s
stepping down, and if somebody asked me honestly am I willing
to stand for the leadership the answer is yes.

AM: There is a sense, looking from the outside, that things are
crumbling at the moment. You’re part of a new group of One
Nation Tories who are being set up inside the party at the
moment. What do you intend to achieve, when you can see that
actual Conservative members across the country are flocking in
their droves to Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party? So what, from
Westminster, do you hope to achieve?
RS: I think the future of British politics has to be radical in the centre ground in British politics. So we need to reunite Scotland against England – you just had Nicola Sturgeon on the phone – you’ve got to bring the United Kingdom together. We’ve got to be radical on climate change. We’ve got to be radical on the environment. We’ve got to reach out to young people. And we’ve got to find a way of talking about what the state can do well for vulnerable people in this country. Something I feel passionately as an ex-Prisons Minister we can do much better.

AM: You’ve dismissed no deal as a failure to get a deal, not a destination. Now, in the polls this morning – and I know they’re only polls – a big substantial majority of British voters now want no deal. A even bigger percentage of Tory voters and Tory supporters want no deal. Can I put it to you, looking at what’s going on across the country, you have simply lost the argument?

RS: I think it’s a difficult argument to make, but the point is, about putting the opportunities for trading with Europe. So to take one example, Europe may need potentially hundreds of millions of electric cars over the next few decades. Britain could be making those cars. We could be selling them to Europe. So what I need to communicate – much, much better to people who are pushing for no deal – is that these trading relationships with Europe can be a fantastic opportunity for Britain, along with the opportunities in America and China and elsewhere.

AM: If you become Conservative leader will you carry on with something very close to Theresa May’s deal or not?

RS: Were I to be lucky enough to become the Conservative leader, I would be pushing for a deal, and that would be very –

AM: Like her deal?

RS: - very close to what we’re talking about at the moment. But the key point about it is the trading opportunities. So let me –

AM: I’m going to stop you there because her deal, we don’t think can get through at all. So you say it’s going to be very close to
that deal. So what is the crucial difference between your proposal and her proposal that would allow it to get through the House of Commons?

RS: Okay. Number one, it’s about building those coalitions in the House of Commons and in the country for a deal. So I would want to go to parliament and say, ‘we’re taking no deal off the table and we’re taking second referendum and remain off the table.’ And I effectively want to lock this country –

AM: Would you legislate for this?

RS: Yes, I’d like to legislate for that. I want those 650 MPs locked in a room talking about what practical Brexit deal they want. We’ve wasted two and a half years with people either talking about something that doesn’t make sense, that’s unnecessary and damaging, which is no deal, or trying to remain in the European Union. That vote was clear and we need to deliver on that. But we need to actually change the constitutional procedures to allow that.

AM: Well, that’s very clear, but an awful lot of Conservatives watching what’s going on around the country, watching Nigel Farage go romp, romp, romp around the country and sweep up your voters, will take an alternative view, and they will say, ‘to protect ourselves against that we need a strong, populist, pro-Brexit, possibly pro-no deal leader of our own. You know the kind of person I’m talking about. I ask you, do you think you and your One Nation Conservatives could live happily inside a Conservative Party led by that kind of leader?

RS: No, I’d find that very difficult, for two reasons. But firstly, no deal Brexit would, I believe, be damaging for the British economy and unnecessary. Secondly, I think people haven’t thought about the fact that it’s not a thing. You’d then have to negotiate a future trading deal. But the most important thing is that if you go down the path of no deal Brexit you’re going to lose four million remain voters who voted for the Conservatives last time, so you won’t win an election, and no deal Brexit is a vote for Jeremy Corbyn.
AM: You’re suggesting the Conservative Party has to split, and some of your colleagues are suggesting this morning that the Conservatives should do a deal with the Brexit Party and, as it were, march shoulder to shoulder with Brussels (sic) which is exactly what you hate as an idea.

RS: I think exactly the reverse. We should be unifying as a party. We should be rediscovering that I have an enormous amount in common with some of my colleagues in ERG, and we need to be a party that can stretch all the way from John Redwood to Ken Clarke. After all, those two people ran together on a leadership ticket, as you remember. We can get back to that. But we also need to get young people voting for us. Only four per cent of Tory voters last election were under 25. Which is why as international Development Secretary, climate and environment saves the planet, but also saves our party.

AM: Saving the planet, Rory Stewart, for now thank you very much.

(ends)