AM: Are we living through a national emergency?
IDS: I think we probably are, yes. I think, to be quite fair. I think what happened over the last four days was as close to a national humiliation as I think I’ve seen. The prime minister on Wednesday, I thought was a mistake –

AM: That speech where she blamed MPs.
IDS: I thought that was a tactical mistake, because I thought that she was obviously frustrated, but I thought that somebody should have said, ‘don’t do it, walk away from it.’ Because it kind of stirred up anger. But I think the biggest problem was she had a plan that she wanted to go and ask for an extension hinged on her deal. She went, they dismissed that. Rather arrogantly I thought. And then promptly gave her something she didn’t ask for, and then we accepted it, and that was this two week extension if she doesn’t get her deal through, or the May deal if we get the deal through. And I thought that was as close to being humiliated as any prime minister I’ve ever seen in Britain.

AM: She’s not a great negotiator is she?
IDS: Well, I don’t think there was any attempt at negotiation on this. As far as I was concerned, I mean, I would have liked to have seen her say, ‘I didn’t ask for that, and therefore that’s off the table. I want the question on what I asked for, which is we leave on the 29th.’ And I think there’s a big frustration going on. You always hear this from politicians. I was on the doorstep, blah, blah, blah. The truth was I was the last two days. And the one constant resounding question was: I thought we were leaving on 29th March, why is that the case? Why aren’t we leaving on the 29th March? Are we going to extend? What’s going on? There’s real puzzlement and anger out there.
AM: You voted against her deal, twice. It's coming back probably next week for the third time. Are you wavering at all?
IDS: I am going to keep – and I recommend my colleagues do – keep their options open on this, because we don’t know what’s happening this week. We have no idea what the alternatives are and whether people vote for this or not depends hugely on whether we are able to leave with no deal or not, or whether there is a change to this. And so I, like everybody else, I think, should keep our options open, and look, and no doubt Steve Barclay later on may be able to set that programme for us.

AM: It’s perfectly possible that the House of Commons takes back control of the order paper next week, and then some form of, quotes, softer Brexit, quotes, is voted through by MPs, which would be disastrous from your point of view.
IDS: Yes, I think we need to get this into perspective. The public is angry about politicians because this idea, I think, that parliament can take control of the government – I mean, full of people that sometimes couldn’t even run a whelk stall but can actually end up running the government for 15 minutes or for a day or something like that. I mean, Oliver Letwin, I’ve had this out with him before. I do not understand what a man who was in government thinks he’s really doing here. This is a recipe for utter chaos and I think it therefore needs to be defeated – defeated by anybody who has a scintilla of a sense that they need to avoid the humiliation of parliament rowing amongst itself for weeks and then extending some absurd length of time.

AM: So the way to avoid all of that, as David Davis and Esther McVey and others from your wing of the party have already said, is to vote for the deal.
IDS: We don’t know whether the deal’s coming back. So as I said earlier on, I am prepared to discuss and keep my options open and I think colleagues are genuinely at the moment keeping their options open to whether or not. You know, we don’t like the
withdrawal agreement because it locks us in at the other end. It makes our negotiating position very poor and it locks us into this backstop, which means either we leave Northern Ireland in the customs union aligned in Europe – in the single market, or we stay with them. So these are the downsides. But having said that, all of this has to be balanced at the end of the day against what is really still on the table. Until we know whether they’re going to bring it back, when they bring it back, it’s impossible to say categorically what our position is. But I will recommend that colleagues should keep their counsel on this one.

AM: You’ve suggested already that you’re not very keen on the way negotiations have gone so far under Theresa May. Do you see her being a good negotiator for the next phase in our relationship going forward or would you like to see her moving aside before that happens?

IDS: Well, all I can say is I think that the negotiations up to now have been less a kind of negotiation and more of a process which allowed the European Union to get their way.

AM: So why would you want more of that?

IDS: Well, my answer is that this now breaks into a second phase. So that would be assuming that the Withdrawal Agreement got through. If it did get through, then I think the second phase needs to be tackled separately and differently.

AM: By somebody else?

IDS: Well, that is a possibility. But I say that this is not something I am now saying that I recommend right here and now. Because if I have anything to say about leadership that will be said, if that’s the case, to the prime minister myself. I’m not like some of these Cabinet ministers running round with collective responsibility, collecting their money and doing all, having all their privileges but turning round to brief against the prime minister in the papers. I think that’s appalling. I think they should be
censured and some of them should be sacked. And the idea of a cabal, by the way, a cabal that never wanted to leave the European Union, turning out to decide what should happen over our future would be unacceptable to my colleagues.

AM: And do you think that’s what’s happening now, this is a Remainer cabal and they’re talking about putting in a caretaker prime minister? Would that be constitutional or acceptable to the Tory Party?
IDS: One, it’s unacceptable to, I think, the whole of the Conservative Party on the back benches - I don’t care what their views were – this is appalling. It’s appalling that it should be done anyway out there on the front of the pages. If the answer is a care taker, whether it’s Mr Lidington or anybody else, if that’s the answer to the question, what the hell was the question? The question is how do we leave, not whether we leave. And that’s the debate that is going on. But the idea you suddenly decide that you can stitch this up – if there is to be a leadership change that leadership change has to be done through the correct process with the membership out there deciding who will be their leader, not some ghastly five or six man and woman cabal that actually decides things internally. We finished that years ago when we came into the idea of electing our leaders, and we’re certainly not going to return to that.

AM: She’s had a very, very hard time, we both know that. But her authority is ebbing away at the moment, you appear to suggest. I can’t quite tell whether you are backing her, and you are saying she should say on, or that you think the time has come for her to move on.
IDS: I think right now any idea of a leadership election would create complete chaos because we are in the middle of trying to figure out over the next few weeks what we do. So suddenly to change the argument is to say to the European Union we’ve lost control completely and to make us a laughing stock around the
world. Whatever happens – the prime minister, we know, has already said she will be stepping down. So the question of that is about when not whether, and that is not something that we need to deal with specifically at the moment. I think the reality for us is all of this stuff on the paper avoids a simple point, which is right now these people in Cabinet, who happily take the privileges, happily take the money, and who have trashed collective responsibility, they need to be held to account. They have one simple question to be answered: if you accept all of that, then do you now back the government or do you not back the government? In which case, go, for god’s sake.

AM: So she should sack some of them.
IDS: Well, frankly most of us on the back benches – I really genuinely say that – are frustrated by, you know, it’s fine on the back benches, you can row as much as you like, you can take your view, but in Cabinet it was always a signal that you actually take the government line and you must defend it, as Steve Barclay will do, I’m sure, today.

AM: And yet, and yet, it would help you to vote for her deal if she announced that she was going to go pretty quickly wouldn’t it?
IDS: Well, I think all these things are nuanced. So the question is really whether or not we think the deal, first and foremost, is acceptable, given the alternatives. And then how that is exercised, of course is a matter that we’ll have to decide on separately. But I’m genuinely not ruling anything out. That’s all I’m saying to you. I’m simple saying, however, that the way that these things are discussed is not like this, and I think she has at least the right and the dignity – they owe her that – not to behave like they’ve behaved today. I think round the country in the Conservative Party and outside the Conservative Party there’ll be real disgust at the behaviour of some of our Cabinet ministers who are not fit for their positions if they behave like this. They should be apologising
and they should shut up, for god’s sake. That’s the last thing we want.

(ends)