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INTERVIEW:

TONY BLAIR

FORMER PRIME MINISTER

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ANDREW MARR:

Now it's fifteen years since Tony Blair entered Downing Street after his first election landslide - "a new dawn", he called it - and this week sees the anniversary of his exit five years ago, five years! Since then he's continued his role in the Middle East as Peace Envoy, he's written his memoirs and enjoyed a lucrative career in business. But there are reports that he's keen to take a more prominent role in domestic politics in support of Labour and Ed Miliband. True or not? Well Tony Blair is with me again. We'll come onto domestic politics in a moment, but could we just start by talking about the euro crisis. We've had another warning - this time from the Spanish Premier - that there's only a week to save the euro. It seems to go on and on. But fundamentally how serious is this, do you think, for Britain in particular?

TONY BLAIR:

It's fundamental for Europe and for Britain. I mean I think the only thing that will save the single currency now is in a sense a kind of grand plan in which Germany is prepared to commit its economy fully to the single currency. That means treating the debts of one as the debts of all, which is very hard for Germany to do, and it means those other countries in the Eurozone need to reform the precise, credible, deliverable programmes of change and reform, so that Europe can regain its competitiveness

because otherwise it's quite unfair to ask Germany to pay. But that is what is necessary now.

ANDREW MARR:

So German pain and pain for the others, and without that the euro is doomed?

TONY BLAIR:

I think it's really hard to see otherwise how you have countries whose economies are at a very different state of development operating within the single currency zone. And the problem at the moment is that Europe in a sense is being presented with a choice on the one hand of austerity plus reform, and on the other hand growth and no reform, and frankly what it needs is growth plus reform; and that means reform in labour markets, pensions, welfare, public services, the role of the state and so on. So you know this is ... Essentially within Europe what has happened is that the single currency's design flaw, if you like, was that it was motivated by politics, delivered in economics, and what had to happen once countries joined the single currency is they had to adjust their economies to come into line with the German economy. And they didn't. Now they're having to do that at a time of crisis. It's really tough to ask countries to undergo this structural reform unless they've got growth and some hope of employment.

ANDREW MARR:

So that takes us to a hardcore much more fused together Central Europe, and we're still on the outside of it?

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, well this is a big challenge for Britain because the problem is whatever happens in the Eurozone now - I mean if it collapses or if it stays - you are going to get major change in Europe. You will have a coming together of the economies of Europe in the so-called fiscal compact; you'll have huge support for banking union within Europe; and you'll have a political reconstruction of Europe because if you're going to exercise more control over the economies in the single currency zone, then people will want the political accountability that comes with that. So in any event there's going to be a huge reconstruction of Europe going on. Now for Britain you know

we've got to make sure we're part of that. We've got to be arguing the case for it and arguing it on our own terms, and that's tough for us.

ANDREW MARR:

Because it might be said - particularly after the latest volume of Alistair Campbell's helpful diaries you must be so pleased to pick up in the bookshop - it might be said that, say what you like about Gordon Brown, but he kept us out of the euro when it was a political project, when it was going in the wrong path, and you wanted us to be in, so you must occasionally say well actually on that at least good old Gordon?

TONY BLAIR:

Well on the economics he was always right. That was never our disagreement. I mean I always took the view that economically you had to make unambiguous case for Britain joining.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah.

TONY BLAIR:

Politically, however, I was always in favour of keeping us very positive towards the project of European integration and able to join at any time we wanted to do so. Now I think the same is true today. I mean the thing that's really important for our country is to understand that yes the Eurozone and European Union is undergoing a huge crisis, the most existential crisis since its inception. However, take a step back, you know look at the broad sweep of history. Because of the way the world's changing today, the size and power of China, India ... You take a country like Indonesia today. We don't know much about it here, but its economy is now growing strongly. It's three times the size of Germany. So in the long-term future of the world, that European project of integration's going to go ahead - like it or not - and it's important that we are part of that because we as a country - 60 million people in a small island nation - if we want to exercise weight and influence, we've got to do it through our alliances in part, and one of those is the European Union.

ANDREW MARR:

And you still think that one day that means that we will have to be part of the euro, if there is a euro to be a part of?

TONY BLAIR:

Look if they sort it all out and if Europe moves forward again, then Britain's going to have a very interesting choice in the future. That's going to be the case. And even if they have to reconstruct the euro as a result of what is happening ... Now supposing the worst happens. You know again take a step back and look at this not in terms of an electoral cycle, but in terms of a generational cycle. The European project's there because the rationale for Europe today is not peace anymore, it's power.

ANDREW MARR:

But where does democracy fit into this because people ...

TONY BLAIR:

(over) That's a good question.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah. Because you can only have a democracy where you have a sort of polity - where everybody speaks pretty much the same language, understands each other, knows the leaders, watches them.

TONY BLAIR:

Right.

ANDREW MARR:

Very difficult to see that happening across twenty-two different languages and countries.

TONY BLAIR:

Absolutely. So one of the reasons why it's so important that Britain is still there and building alliances, arguing its case, is that I think in the politics of Europe we have something very specific and unique to contribute because I think that our political

system is in many ways the most effective. I mean my experience of dealing with the European Union, I would say the British when they exert themselves usually get their way actually in Europe. And when this political reconstruction happens - which it will irrespective of what happens to the euro - it's important that we're part of that.

ANDREW MARR:

Right.

TONY BLAIR:

So you know we've got a set of short-term choices about how we manage this situation. I think, as I say, the only way to preserve the euro is what I call a kind of grand plan. These incremental changes, whether it's on the Spanish banks or whatever else, they don't work.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Not enough, not enough.

TONY BLAIR:

You need a fundamental you know plan that is put before people where the thing is sorted out - where you clean up the balance sheets of the banks, where you organise how you're going to deal with the reform programmes in these various countries. So that is the short-term challenge. Long-term then there is a reconstruction of Europe in which our country, it's got to have its voice heard.

ANDREW MARR:

Yes. Sticking with the British constitution, a story in the Independent today all over the front page alleging that you ... It says: 'At last the truth. How Blair misled cabinet over Iraq'. And for new readers, start here: the allegations coming from Alistair Campbell's diaries is that you did not want the then Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, to present both sides of the case - the case that the war was legal and that it might not be legal to cabinet because that was too nuanced and it would be too dangerous in cabinet.

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, this is ...

ANDREW MARR:

True?

TONY BLAIR:

It's not true. And, what's more, we went through this at the Chilcot Inquiry I mean literally ad infinitum and no doubt we'll carry on doing so. Look, you know people like the Independent and so on, you know I'll never win this argument with them over Iraq. It's just worth remembering we have two interesting anniversaries that have occurred recently. One is Halabja and Saddam's use of chemical weapons against that Kurdish town which, by the way, as many people died in three days as have died in the whole of what has happened in Syria in the last year. And, secondly, the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq War, where we should just remember that there were literally hundreds of thousands of conscript young Iranians who lost their lives again through the use of chemical weapons and actually something that very much triggered the Iranian interest in developing nuclear weapons. So I understand why people still have this disagreement over Iraq and I don't suppose we'll ever resolve it, but we should at least understand there's a balanced perspective on it.

ANDREW MARR:

Sure. But just to be absolutely clear, because it does go ... I mean the question of what cabinet government really is is relevant to this. It's not true that you stopped there being a proper discussion of the legal case with the Attorney General putting his position in front of cabinet, so that people would disagree; Clare Short and Robin Cook and so on could have their say?

TONY BLAIR:

No it's absolutely not true - and, by the way, they did have their point of view. I mean this is why ... The notion that cabinet never discussed this issue is absurd. I understand why people disagree over it, but it's not a matter of ... There is no great ... You know they've gone over this so many times. There is no great hidden conspiracy about this. It was a decision. Now some people agree with it, some people disagree

with it. I think when you look at the Middle East today, I think again in the broad sweep of history people will take rather a different view of it.

ANDREW MARR:

Well I'd like to ask you about the Middle East today because we're still waiting today to hear the formal result of the Egyptian Elections, but it looks likely that the Muslim Brotherhood candidate will win - or that seems to be the sense. What about the ... can I hear your reflection on the problem that the more democracy you get - we are in favour of democracy, we want democracy but democracy may very well deliver Islamist people in power, we see Christians in Syria are now very worried about what's going to happen when Assad goes, you know - what's the answer?

TONY BLAIR:

Well it's a very good point. The answer is first of all to understand that this Arab Revolution, which is continuing and is going to carry on - you know I don't call it an Arab spring, it's a revolution and it's going to continue sweeping across the whole region and beyond it - it's not like the fall of the Berlin wall. I mean this is a mistake for Western analysts to think this. In the case of Eastern Europe and the Berlin wall, people in Eastern Europe looked over the wall. There was a united view as to what they wanted. They wanted what we had in Western Europe and by and large they got it. Here in this region, there are two very different views as to what comes next once you lift the lid off these dictatorships. One is a view that is very much secular, modernising, liberal minded. The other is very much based on a religious view of society. And you can't understand the Middle East and what's happening in the Middle East unless you understand the fundamental importance of religion in society.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) But that's more toxic ...

TONY BLAIR:

(over) Absolutely.

ANDREW MARR:

... because those are not reconcilable really.

TONY BLAIR:

Correct. So this is why what I say for the West now is that we should realise ... And this is very unfortunate, we've got two crises going on at the same time for Western leaders. One is Europe and the other is the Middle East, and unfortunately these crises don't come sequentially; they're together. And in the Middle East we have got to remain engaged with this process because we should be supporting a programme I think of evolution across this region. We should understand that revolution will throw up these very dangerous and toxic forces - actually you can see this from Iraq indeed - so what is necessary is to understand short-term this is going to be really, really difficult. Now long-term, by the way, this is good.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) It mightn't? Okay.

TONY BLAIR:

(over) Yeah long-term this is good.

ANDREW MARR:

Sure.

TONY BLAIR:

You know the good news from the Middle East: people want freedom.

ANDREW MARR:

Okay.

TONY BLAIR:

The bad news is they're going to have a struggle getting to a form of democracy that is genuinely open-minded and pluralistic.

ANDREW MARR:

Long-term, short-term. Five years already since you left Downing Street. It's said that, we read that you want to take a role again in British public life a bit more. Lots of the issues that you struggled with are back on the front pages again. Immigration, for instance. Ed Miliband says that Labour got it wrong in the past over immigration, didn't take people's concerns seriously enough. Fair point?

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, I think it's fair in some ways. I think particularly when we ... I mean I actually took this decision. I mean in some ways I don't regret it actually because I think the Polish community and other communities from Eastern Europe actually do good work in our country. I mean I'm happy with them. But I understand how there's a very you know marked sensitivity around that. Remember we fought the 2005 Election on immigration when the then Conservative Leader wanted to make that a point of attack against us and we confronted it and took it head on because we had a policy at the time - identity cards, which have gone out of fashion but I still think are the only way of dealing with what is the central problem here, which is I don't think it's so much about immigration per se. I think most reasonable people in Britain can see immigrants have made a great contribution to our country. It's where it's uncontrolled ...

ANDREW MARR:

Yes.

TONY BLAIR:

... it's illegal, where people come in and you know you've got organised crime and drugs and so on, which is very specific from certain parts. And so my view is you know you can get to a balanced debate on this, and I think that's what Ed's trying to do.

ANDREW MARR:

So what about the party generally because there's been a debate about its future? We heard about Blue Labour, John Cruddas coming in and all the rest of it, going back to connect to some of the core supporters who may have drifted away during the New Labour years and may need to be brought back in. Doing better in the opinion polls,

but of course oppositions very often do well in the opinion polls halfway through governments. What's your reflection?

TONY BLAIR:

I think my reflection is first of all the good news is that those people who feared Labour would go sort of like we did in 1979 - you know when we got defeated, we went crazy for a few years - we're not. We're going to be in contention at the next election and that's a tribute to the leadership and to the way the party is a lot more mature and smarter today.

ANDREW MARR:

Are you slightly surprised that Ed Miliband's done perhaps a little better than you may have feared right at the beginning?

TONY BLAIR:

No, I've always thought that Ed is a smart guy. Look I'm not hiding the fact I was a ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) A David ...

TONY BLAIR:

... a David supporter because I worked very closely with David and admire him very much. But no, I think ... Look, I'm still an unashamed Third Wayer. I mean you know I think that actually where politics is going in the world today means that you need a very modern view of progressive politics, but I think Labour's perfectly capable of getting to that and articulating a distinctive view from either the Conservative Party or the Labour Party of the past. And you know look for me in playing a part in British politics, it's more that you know I've spent five years building a new ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Life.

TONY BLAIR:

... organisation and life. I've got two major global foundations, one of which works in Africa, many parts of Africa today, one of which is about this issue of religious extremism and how we get different faiths working together. So I spend ... I've just come back from my 86th visit to the Middle East, so ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Yes. But in domestic/European terms, another big job in it for you?

TONY BLAIR:

Well you know I've always said I'm a public service person first, so I'd have been happy carrying on as Prime Minister, I'd have been happy taking the European job as President of the European Union. But you know if I'm not doing that, I'm going to make a difference in a different way. I think here you know where I can contribute, I will. If people want to listen, that's fine. If they don't, that's also fine.

ANDREW MARR:

That's also fine. Well in case they do want to listen, what about Jimmy Carr, the controversy at the moment? Tax avoidance rather than evasion. Any sympathy for him?

TONY BLAIR:

I think the mood on this has changed. You know people ... What people maybe would have not cared about a few years back, if you're in a time of economic difficulty and austerity, then people you know they care about these things. I don't want to single out one person, but ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) I know, but you should ...

TONY BLAIR:

(over) ... but I think in general terms, no the mood on this debate has changed.

ANDREW MARR:

It's moral to pay tax?

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, I think you know in the end you know this is a tough time and people need to know that the pain's being shared.

ANDREW MARR:

Tony Blair, thank you very much indeed for joining us today.

TONY BLAIR:

Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS