AM: Good morning, Richard. Can I ask you first of all, the deal has now been signed, it’s done, it’s over. What happens next from Labour’s point of view?
RB: Well, nothing’s a done deal until Parliament’s had its say on what Theresa May’s proposing. And it looks as if she can’t even get the support of her own Tory MPs, the DUP, certainly not Labour, certainly not the Liberal Democrats, so really nothing’s done until our parliament’s taken back control and had it’s say, and it doesn’t look too good, to say the least, for Theresa May’s half-baked deal.

AM: Do you think – I mean, Tony Blair said it was a dodo – do you think it’s a dead duck, this thing, it’s not going to get through parliament under any circumstances?
RB: Well, what Theresa May needs to do is wake up and smell the coffee, ditch this deal and come back with something better. Something which can command the support of a majority of MPs. And I’d suggest that what she does is come back with the deal that Labour’s proposed, and then we can guarantee it will get through parliament.

AM: Surprise, surprise. But that’s not going to happen, and it is too late to renegotiate something. It’s been done, the EU have made it absolutely clear that they are not reopening this negotiation at this point. So Labour is now in the position, you vote this down and you drive the country clearer and faster towards no deal. That’s just logic, that’s the English language. If there isn’t a deal, there is no deal.
RB: Well, one of the worst things that Theresa May and her government have done through this is, in effect, hold the country to ransom, battling two groups of people, two different things at
the same time. Theresa May has been telling people who voted Remain that the choice is either her half-baked deal or a disastrous no deal, and then she’s telling people who voted Leave that the choice is between her half-baked deal and remaining in the European Union. In other words, no Brexit. Actually, there is – I know this phrase has become more and more popular – there is a third way. And the third way is Labour’s sensible, common sense deal that’ll actually bring the country together.

AM: Well, let’s talk about something else that appears to be on the table. There’s five Cabinet ministers and quite a lot of Tory MPs beginning to rally behind the idea of Britain instead staying inside the EEA. The Norway-style arrangement. That’s very, very close to what Labour wants as well. Presumably in those circumstances Labour would back it.

RB: No, because the Norway arrangement doesn’t meet our customs union test. Norway’s not in a customs union.

AM: So you’d vote everything down really, wouldn’t you? And the problem is you say that you’d like a general election, a general election requires a lot of Tory MPs to vote for it. About a hundred Tory MPs would have to vote in favour of an election in which their party was divided and had failed on Brexit. It’s a very, very unlikely thing to imagine any party doing that. You might want it, but they’re not going to give it to you.

RB: Well, a lot of things have seemed unlikely in politics recently and lots of the experts have got it wrong. The experts predicted the last EU referendum wrong, the experts said that Trump could never be elected and wish he hadn’t have been. The experts said that Labour would be smashed at the last general election, we weren’t. The experts said Jeremy Corbyn would never be elected as prime minister. I think the age of the experts is over. The age of political certainty is over. And of course we want to be in government as soon as possible, but we want to get the best deal
for the country to bring people, both who voted Remain and who voted Leave, together. We think we can do that.

AM: I never thought I’d hear Richard Burgon channelling Michael Gove, but there you go. Age of the experts is over, he’d agree with that. Nonetheless, Labour has a series of options in front of you. If you get your election, and you’re right, anything might happen, you might get the election – Labour would presumably go into that election advocating Brexit. You’d go in wanting us to leave the EU in March next year.

RB: Well, it depends when an election is. I mean, Labour –

AM: Let’s assume it’s quite quickly.

RB: Well, we’re in the age of hypotheticals here on the – the era of hypotheticals. Let me say this: Labour, if we were in government now, would have negotiated and would be negotiating a deal to respect the result of the referendum and leave the EU on the basis of the common sense Brexit arrangement that we’ve put forward. So if we were in government now that’s what we would be doing. We don’t know when the next general election is going to be, we don’t know what the state of things will be at that time.

AM: I’m only asking you about it because that’s what you say as a party you want to happen. If it doesn’t happen, and I’d suggest it’s quite unlikely, if it doesn’t happen, another thing on the table, as Tony Blair was describing, is another referendum on this. That is still something that’s possible for Labour MPs to vote for in the end, isn’t it?

RB: Well, a second referendum isn’t off the table. Our conference policy has made that clear. But there’s a whole sequence of events to go before then. And we think the priority is trying to force the government to get a better deal, a deal that’s in the national interest, a deal that has, crucially, a permanent customs union in it. A deal that, crucially, protects workers’ rights,
environmental protections and consumer protections. And security.

AM: As Richard Burgon, how would you vote in another referendum, if remaining in the EU was on the table versus Brexit of some kind?
RB: Well, there’s lots of ifs. We don’t know if there’s going to be a second referendum.

AM: But you must know what you feel about it.
RB: We don’t know when such a referendum, if it takes place, would take place. Would it take place before we left the EU? Would it take place after we left the EU? What I’ll say is I’m happy to come back on this programme and discuss that in detail if we have a second referendum. But what we’ve got to focus on now is what’s happening today and what’s happening in the next two weeks. We’re now reaching a point where Theresa May is trying to push through parliament an ill-fated, half-baked deal that’s the worst of all worlds. We need to work as hard as we can to ensure she thinks again and try and bring people together on the basis of a deal that works in the national interest.

AM: Isn’t the truth of this that you are trying to create as much of a crisis as possible to shatter the government, bring it down and get the election, but in doing that you are risking the possibility of no deal?
RB: No. We’re totally opposed to no deal. And I go back again – I say it because it’s true – we’re going back –
AM: So how are you going to stop it?
RB: We’re going back to point where Theresa May and many commentators opposing a false choice for the country, as if it’s between Theresa May’s dreadful deal and no deal, or if it’s between Theresa May’s deal and no Brexit. There is another option.
AM: I do understand that. I understand that. But nonetheless, what I’m still struggling with, the clock is ticking, this is an international agreement, at the end of March next year we leave the EU, unless something extraordinary intervenes. And when people are saying we’re going to stop no deal, there’s a majority of the Commons against no deal and all the rest of it, what is the mechanism which actually stops there being a no deal?
RB: Well, amendments can be put down, motions can be –
AM: No legal force, no legal force.
RB: Well, there’s a great political force to what the House of Commons decides, and I think that’s very important, as people across this divide have said, about making sure that our parliament has its say, reasserting parliamentary sovereignty. It is meant to be taking power back for our parliament after all.

AM: In a world of ifs and maybes, Richard Burgon, thanks very much indeed for talking to us this morning.
(ends)