ANDREW MARR SHOW, TONY BLAIR, 25TH NOVEMBER, 2018

TONY BLAIR
PRIME MINISTER, 1997-2007

AM: The campaign to have another EU referendum, which calls itself the People’s Vote, has been gathering pace. Among its leading supporters is the fervent pro-European, the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Mr Blair, can I start by suggesting you have always been a pragmatic politician. You’re a pragmatist, you’re in favour of life and business basically carrying on. This deal ensures that goods carry on flowing without tariffs. The one thing that people voted for in the referendum which is an end to free movement happens. In many ways life for most people if this went through would feel very much the same. So why are you so against it?

TB: I’m against it because the whole basis of Theresa May’s case to the British people is that this honours the Brexit mandate and it settles the issue. And actually neither is correct. It doesn’t honour the Brexit mandate because the people who most fervently believe in Brexit say this isn’t Brexit, and it doesn’t settle the issue because actually there’s so much still to be discussed that even those people who stay in the Cabinet at the moment who are really anti her plan, but stay in it tactically, want to pull us the other side of March 2019 and carry on the fight. And therefore the only way you’re going to unite the county ultimately is to get this back to the people and say you’ve got a mandate, whether the government does a proper Brexit – that’s the sort of Brexit that Boris Johnson wants – or that we stay. And that is you know the only way of resolving this now because I think her deal will fail because in the end it will satisfy no one. It’s actually only succeeded in uniting people in opposition to it.
AM: So you want to take it back to another referendum. Can I put it to you, it’s a bit like that glorious day for you in 1997, you’ve been elected Prime Minister, you’re in your limousine, you’re on your way to Downing Street and the police knock on the door and say, I’m terribly sorry, we’ve had a discussion and we’re going to rerun the election. You would have been absolutely horrified and outraged, and that’s what Brexit voters feel like when people suggest rerunning the referendum.

TB: Okay, but here’s the other thing that Brexit voters feel and it’s a bit like me having come in as Leader of the Labour Party and then suddenly decided I’ve become a Conservative, right. The issue for the Brexit people is precisely the reason why we should go back and put it to the people for a final vote, because the very people who agitated most strongly for Brexit are now saying, this isn’t Brexit and therefore literally why are we doing it? We’re not doing it to satisfy them and it obviously doesn’t satisfy people like me. And the reason the government is in this position – it’s really important we understand this. All the way through the problem has been very simple. For four and a half decades Britain has been trading in Europe, you’ve grown up with these intricate supply chains for manufacturing industry, you’ve got a financial service sector that allows us to be outside the Euro but still the financial centre for the Euro. You’ve got all sorts of things like cheap air travel, mobile telephony, all of these things have developed as part of Europe’s single market. So the problem for the government –

AM: The English in particular have never been ruled by anybody else.

TB: Yes but – and not by the now I would say, but if you take the Brexit argument they want to get out of all those rules. So your dilemma is this. You either get out of the single market, in which case you’re going to do economic damage, at least in the short
and medium term, that’s the painful Brexit, but if you don’t, and you do what Theresa May wants which is stay tied to Europe’s rules – this is what the Chequers document says – then you’re in a pointless Brexit. So your choice is between painful and pointless and that’s the reason why we’ve had a problem all the way through. And the Northern Ireland issue by the way is just a metaphor for the whole problem. Because if you want a frictionless border in Ireland you’ve got to stay in the single market and the customs union.

AM: Okay, let’s return to the referendum idea. This can only happen if MPs vote for it.
TB: Yeah.
AM: And do you think there’s really a majority in the House of Commons for another referendum?
TB: Not yet, but I think it’ll get there.
AM: How will it get there? I mean there’s talk in the paper today of the People’s Vote campaigners talking to the leadership of the Labour Party – really it will only happen if the Labour Party whips its MPs to make it happen.
TB: Yeah.
AM: And there’s no sign of that at the moment.
TB: Well, I think it’s moving that way. I would be really surprised if the Labour Party doesn’t end up in the position of supporting another vote, because there’s no other proposition that can get through parliament by the way. People aren’t going to vote for this deal, because it’s I’m afraid a bad deal and people –
AM: You can see a collapse and a General Election, couldn’t you?
TB: I think it’s highly unlikely the Conservative Party will want to have a General Election. I mean if the Conservative Party had a general election with Brexit unresolved, it really would be a suicidal act. Now you know, politics is politics today so heaven knows, but I doubt that’s going to happen. So I think – I can’t quite specify exactly how it happens in parliamentary procedure,
but I think when you start to exclude all the other possibilities you're really left in the end with that one.

AM: Well let's return to this crucial question of what Labour might do, because it might be said that Jeremy Corbyn- and you disagree with him about almost everything – on this he may be wiser he may – I mean he's been on the fence on the referendum issue, very, very uncomfortably but carefully for a long time, because he understands the very, very large number of Labour voters, particularly in the north east of England and the east of England which you used to represent, really really care about Brexit, want it to happen and if he goes against them he may lose all of those seats and therefore he's been playing a very clever long term balancing act. And I don't see why he suddenly comes off the fence at this point.

TB: Right, so her's why I think he does. I mean I completely get it if you're in a heavily Leave seat and you're a Labour MP, you're worried that if you vote –
AM: Yeah.
TB: Right. But these people who voted for Brexit, if they think what they're getting is not really Brexit, how are you appeasing them or making them happier because you're voting for Theresa May's deal? And this is why I say the central question here is if it's not a deal that satisfies the people who voted for Brexit, why on earth are we doing it? Just roll round in your mind the extraordinary –
AM: I get that.
TB: But here's the point. If it isn't what those people who voted Brexit really want, why are we doing it?
AM: Well, because people voted for something and this is something basically.
TB: Right, but it's not what they voted for. And that's why I say to you the curious thing is people say well look if you have another
referendum you’re going to divide the country. It’s the opposite. And I’ll tell you why.

AM: I want to come directly onto that, because the first referendum was an incredibly divisive moment for the country. Everyone got very, very angry. One MP was killed as a result. People got incredibly inflamed and if you go back and you run it all again for month after month after month, don’t you look at the prospect of that with some horror what it would do? Dividing families, dividing communities, dividing the country?

TB: Okay, so take the two scenarios. You go ahead with what we’ve got. We don’t really know what we’re voting for. The meaningful vote in parliament I literally don’t know how the government say they’ve got something meaningful for parliament to vote on when you read that political declaration. We’re going to be kept in the customs union until Europe allows us out of it. If Chequers goes forward we’re going to be tied to Europe’s rules but having lost our say. I think this is a kind of botched Brexit. If you do that the other side of March 2019, you’re just carrying on this fight. Okay. If on the other hand people like me who voted Remain feel okay, we’ve had two and a half years of trying to make this thing work. We now instead of claim and counterclaim have real facts we can debate, we would feel satisfied by having another opportunity to put our case.

AM: Even if you lost?
TB: Even if we lost, and I’ll come to that in a minute because it’s very important. And the people who voted Leave can actually put forward, and everyone would accept, this is real Leave. If you’re going to vote Leave you’ll have real leave.

AM: If it went your way, why would you not have another referendum after that? Best of three, best of five, best of seven.
TB: Here's the other thing that should happen. Both the Remain campaign and the Leave campaign should jointly agree that this vote is final, doesn't matter how marginal it is, it's final. Once this is resolved then that's it for a generation. And I would feel we'd had the opportunity to make our case, so I would feel better about it and these Leave people who feel think this is a botched Brexit, it isn't really Brexit, they would also feel better about it.

AM: We were told the last one was final.
TB: Yes, but here's the problem. Since then we've had two and a half years of negotiation and we've discovered there are many varieties of Brexit. So this is why in the end – I know it sounds hard –

AM: And so what would the question be? Would it be Remain, Leave with a so called hard Brexit, or something like the Prime Minister's deal, because you'd have to give people a range of options wouldn't you?

TB: So you've got two options on this, and I'll tell you which one I prefer. Option one is you go Remain or the Boris Johnson version of Leave, 'cause that’s what the Brexit people really want. Option two, is you have three offers. You could do Remain, the Boris Johnson Brexit, the Theresa May Brexit. I personally think the first is simpler. You take the two propositions that actually have public support and you put it to the British people. If you do that and it's a final say and both campaigns agree this is it. Whatever way we vote that’s it. And I promise you this for people like me who voted Remain, if the country votes again to Leave I accept it and I'll get behind it and try and make it work.

AM: About a year ago, or six months ago there was an awful lot of talk about Labour had gone to the left, there was a huge number of voters left in the centre of British politics. There was going to be a remaking of British politics, a new party, perhaps you would
going to be involved, perhaps you weren’t going to be involved. Money was being raised. That’s all over, isn’t it?

TB: No. I think it’s not all over. I mean I’m not involved in it myself but I think if you have a very left wing Labour Party and you have a Brexit dominated Conservative Party you leave a big space in the middle. But I think frankly that for the moment is for another day. I think right now what people realise is that Brexit is the issue and you’ve got to focus on that.

AM: Okay. You are one I think of four living people who have done Theresa May’s job. I just wondered, putting the politics to one side, what you make of her at the moment. Every day she gets up and is assailed again by criticism from every single side. It may feel slightly familiar. Goes into the House of Commons for a kind of crucial vote. There’s Cabinet revolts back behind her. What do you make of her performance as a practising politician looking at another?

TB: As a person?

AM: Yes.

TB: I have a lot of respect for it. I think she’s shown resilience. I think she’s shown a degree of courage in standing up and getting on and you know she’s a decent person, frankly surrounded by a lot of pretty unreasonable ones. The trouble is the problem is having said all that the deal’s a dodo. So this is the difficulty that she has, but in personal terms, you know I’ve done the job, I know how difficult it is. I really you know, I respect the fact she manages to stand up and get on with it. I think that’s a great capability, a great characteristic.

AM: A stand up woman.

TB: Yes she is and I - this is not a personal thing. Personally I can see a lot to admire in the way that she handles herself. It’s that literally this is the destiny of our country and it’s the wrong
decision for our country. And this is why we have to resolve it finally through the people.

Ends