AM: Before we come on to Brexit, Tim Farron, let me ask you about the Theresa May visit because she had a very, very tough line to walk. She and we need a deal with this man. We have to for the future prosperity of our communities and our children have a good deal with America and yet we are all, Liberal Democrats, the opposition, everybody is saying to her, you must be more forthright and must be more outspoken. In a sense more insulting to the man you’re asking for a deal. It’s a very, very hard job she had to play.

TF: It’s not insulting to stand up to somebody who is behaving in a way which is appalling. Arguing for the introduction of torture, being misogynistic and his appalling ban on people entering the United States from Muslim countries. We would have expected her to go over to the United States to stand up to Donald Trump. She ended up holding his hand. And it seems to me that what we have at the moment is a weak position. Donald Trump himself wrote in the Art of the Deal thirty years ago that the best time for you to make a deal is when the other guy is desperate. And she looked desperate.

AM: He sees weakness here, is what you’re saying.

TF: For certain. Now it seems to me it’s quite right for the Prime Minister of Britain to talk to the United States president. If you only talk to people who share your values on the international stage you’ll be very, very lonely. Of course it’s right to go and talk to him. What it was wrong to do is to go over there and effectively roll over in the face of the appalling actions, in particular the ban on people entering Muslim countries – from...
AN: But, if I can just put this gently, we don’t what she said to him privately and again in this circumstance where we are asking him for a generous trade deal, to grandstand against him seems to be a dangerous thing for us for her to do.

TF: We do know that it took until the early hours of this morning and the second or third redraft of a statement, it took until then for Theresa May to stand up and even say that she gently disagreed with what Donald Trump was doing. She should have opposed this from the beginning, but once it became apparent this was going to be something that would affect British people and Nadhim Zahawi we saw earlier on, Mo Farah, the guy who drove me here this morning, he’s an Iranian UK dual national, this affects British people and you expect the British Prime Minister to fight Britain’s corner.

AM: So what do you want the government now to do?

TF: Well I want her to fight Britain’s corner. To be very, very clear I want Theresa May to be what a good friend to America would be and tell them how it is. Don’t go over there and just be supine and hold his hand.

AM: Well she wasn’t supine in the sense she got things out of him on NATO and so forth that many people thought she would not get. Assuming this ban is still in place – it’s a temporary ban, it’s being challenged in the courts at the moment so we don’t quite know what’s going to happen, but if it’s still in place in the summer when President Trump comes to this country for a state visit, do you want to see him addressing the House of Commons?

TF: Well I mean it’s important that you have people leading other countries engaging with us. I thought the offer of a state visit was hasty, particularly given the things he’s been coming out with recently. My view is that of course you should engage with people
like this, but there’s a massive difference between engaging with Donald Trump and effectively giving succour to the kind of things that he’s coming out with. He is undermining that kind of consensus, that sort of moderate, internationalist, peaceful, tolerant consensus of the western world over the last 70 years that Britain, America and Europe have been the pillars of and we should not give in so lightly because Theresa May has put herself in a desperate position because she sought a hard Brexit. She’s in a position where she’s alienating our friends to the east and she’s in a desperate position and of course Donald Trump can smell desperation three thousand miles away.

AM: So let’s turn to Brexit. It’s pretty clear that you want us to stay inside the EU. Is that fair?

TF: Well it’s never been anything other than the Liberal commitment.

AM: And you would like us somehow to stop Brexit happening?

TF: My view is that we’re never going to get a better deal than the one we currently have in the European Union. That doesn’t mean I don’t respect the result last June. The reality is that that referendum took place so the government has a mandate to negotiate Brexit with the European Union. What Theresa May does not have is a mandate to make the choice that she just has which to go for a hard Brexit, outside the single market. I’d argue that what she’s done is she’s assumed that the 52% meant what Nigel Farage means. I think that’s a massive insult to the majority of people who voted to leave.

AM: Sorry, stop you now, but again and again and again in that chair, that very chair there was Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, David Cameron, George Osborne and I asked every single one of that does coming out of the EU mean coming out of the single
market and every one of them said yes. So I take it that people understood that we were leaving the single market because it so intertwined with the rest of the EU that being in one really means being in the other.

TF: But I mean you and I, both been sat on the sofa there with Nigel Farage who’s also argued for Britain being like Norway and like Switzerland. What are they? They are countries outside the EU and inside the single market. And if you really were arguing Britain’s corner in Europe then Theresa May would go in arguing for Britain to be in the single market. She’s waved the white flag. That’s why she’s in a weak position with Donald Trump because he can see that we are desperate.

AM: So is your preferred option from where we are now, after the referendum to somehow stay inside the EU or is it to be outside the EU but inside the single market?

TF: Put simply the British people have the right to have the final decision on all this. Theresa May will return from Europe with a deal. We don’t know what it’s going to look like, she doesn’t really know what it’s going to look like and somebody will decide on that deal. Will it be Theresa May? Will it be parliament? Or will it be the British people? We think the British people should decide on the terms of the deal and of course in that referendum on the terms of the deal the other option would be for the British people to say, well thanks very much, but no thanks, we’ll stay put.

AM; The problem is of course with that second referendum is that apart from the Liberal Democrats nobody else is calling for it and so the chances of it actually happening are vanishingly small.

TF: Well you make the very strong case for the Liberal Democrats growing in size.
AM: That wasn’t my intention.

TF: Well there you are, you did it anyway. My sense is that our job is to scrutinise this process, to say look, someone is going to decide on this deal. Somebody is. Theresa May, her government, parliament or the people and we say it should be the people and democratically and logically of course it should be the people. We also say that it’s unlikely – and we may be wrong – but it’s unlikely that we’ll ever do a deal with Europe that is as good as the one we have now and we’re not ashamed of saying that that is the case. It might be brave for us to stand up for this position but somebody needs to. And what we’re doing is offering people a vehicle for this not to be over and done with. For the British people to still remain paramount in this, for their will to be expressed at the end of this process not just at the beginning.

AM: Given that there is a very important issue now about to be discussed in the House of Commons as part of the Article 50 triggering debate, which is when the final vote on the deal can take place in the House of Commons. Now as it understand it the government is saying at the end of the process when we have got our agreement we come back to the House of Commons and you either accept our agreement or we leave on WTO rules and that’s it. The Labour Party and many others I think in your party want to see a vote before the end of the deal. So what are the chances of parliament votes, parliamentary confrontations if you like during the two year process before it’s over?

TF: Well of course parliament should be holding government to account throughout all of this. We want the best deal possible which is why Theresa May giving up on membership of the single market at the beginning is so foolish. It puts her in a position where she’s got no serious negotiating position to start off with. Yes, of course, over the two year period we should be holding the government to account, but in the end the big issue is what kind
of deal will she come back with? This will dictate the kind of
country we are, the kind of relationship we have with the rest of
the world, how prosperous we are for perhaps the next half a
century and somebody will decide on that deal at the end. Should
it be Theresa May on her own? Should it be her government,
should it be parliament, or should it be the British people? And the
only logical and democratic end is for the British people to have
the say at the end.

AM: You say in a sense that you’re speaking for the 48% who
voted to stay.

TF: I think we’re speaking for many people in the 52% who don’t
believe they voted for the extreme version of Brexit that Theresa
May has chosen.

AM: Can I put it to you that you’d be speak effectively for them
with your small number of MPs, your 9 MPs, if you were actually
reaching out to other parties who took the same view. If you were
reaching out to the SNP, if you were reaching out to the Labour
Party, but you won’t because in the end you’re all still tribal?

TF: Well there’s a danger in British politics that it does make you
live within silos. One of the advantages of the referendum it was
great spending time with people like Caroline Lucas, with Sarah
Wollaston, with Harriet Harman, campaigning on an issue we had
in common and finding out there was much more we had in
common also. But the reality is I think that the two great threats
Britain faces at the moment, one is hard Brexit, the other is a Tory
government for the next 25 years and it seems to me that the
Liberal Democrats need to grow to provide that decent, moderate,
progressive alternative to the Tories.

AM: Not surprising to hear you say that. Can I ask you almost in
one word, very, very quickly, with Article 50 coming to the House
of Commons next week is there any chance that Theresa May can be defeated on any of those amendments?

TF: Well only if all parties and that means many Conservatives, vote in the interest of their constituents and vote for there to be democracy at the end of the process as well as at the beginning.

ENDS