ANDREW MARR SHOW, 31ST MARCH, 2019
SIR JOHN MAJOR
Prime Minister, 1990-1997
AM: Sir John. Not many good options facing the current Prime
Minister at the moment. You heard Tom Watson there saying he’s
not terribly keen on some kind of government of national unity.
But do you think that this is the moment when the two sides of
the Commons have to start to work together?
JM: If we wish to get an outcome that’s generally satisfactory we
have to look at what Brexit is going to mean, both in the short
term and the long term. And if I can enlarge on that I’ll answer
the question directly. If you look in the future at Brexit there are
several things other than the wellbeing economically of the British
nation, other than its prestige around the world that could
happen. I think a hard Brexit in particular, leaving with no deal,
would put at risk the union with Scotland an over time the union
with Northern Ireland. That is too high a price and I think that’s
something parliament has to bear in mind. Now if you look
forward some people think that when we have got this withdrawal
deal that it’s all done, but in fact that is merely the beginning.
There are going to be years and years and years of negotiation.
And those negotiations are going to involve very difficult choices
for us, particularly in the trade deals. And so we are going to need
a government that has a clear majority or we’re going to have the
sort of constitutional chaos we have at the moment stretching for
a very long ahead.
Now there are only two ways to get such a government. One is a
General Election that produces a clear working majority for one of
the parties.
AM: Not impossible.
JM: Not impossible but very unlikely that it would produce a clear
working majority. The other alternative is to have some form of
unity or national government. Now I don’t think that is imminent,
but if we have a General Election in the autumn, which I think is
possible not certain, but entirely possible, and we don’t get a
government with a clear majority, then I think it would be in the national interest to have a cross party government so that we can take decisions without the chaos that we’re seeing in parliament at the moment when every possible alternative is rejected.

AM: The last time we were talking about a national unity government is 1940. Do you think the country is facing that sort of level of crisis and if you were in Number 10 would you be thinking about a national unity government now?

JM: I would have been thinking about it for some time. Does it compare with 1940? Of course it doesn’t. In 1940 our very existence was at stake. That was a unique set of circumstances. But if you consider what is at stake at the moment, the living standards of the British nation. The worldwide reputation of Britain which has not done well during this argument about Brexit. The unity of the UK and whether we lose Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the very structure of our politics which is now threatened. Now if that doesn’t collectively constitute a constitutional and political crisis, then I cannot imagine what does. And although people criticise our political system it has served us very well for a very, very long time. And to see it break up would be a tragedy and would be something we couldn’t easily repair. So yes, I think we may be driven to a national government.

AM: We’re in very, very unfamiliar, slightly eerie territory here. How would it actually happen? Would a Conservative Prime Minister invite in leading Labour politicians, Scottish National politicians and others to join the Cabinet? Is that how it would work?

JM: I think that is how it would have to work. Whomsoever is Prime Minister would have to invite people in from the other parties, so that you could be guaranteed of having a majority in parliament. Now I don’t like this idea. I don’t think it’s ideal. I’d much prefer a Conservative government with a clear majority. But
I do think in the interests of the nation, in the interests of decisions being taken, in the interests of ending the chaos that we have now and that could continue, we must have a government that has a working majority. And that is the only reason for a time limited unity government.

AM: Okay, so one of the other options of course facing the Prime Minister at the moment, much talk in the newspapers about it today is calling a General Election this week. What would your advice to her be on that?
JM: Don’t. I mean don’t, for a whole range of reasons. I mean we face enough difficulties. The Prime Minister is blocked in on every side. I utterly can empathise with her frustration. But I think a General Election will solve nothing at this moment and at a moment when feelings are very high and you began to see that in the Brexit demonstration outside the House the other day, when feelings are running high I think a General Election is pretty much the very last thing that we need. We might be driven to it later, but now is certainly not the moment.

AM: And do you think it’s reasonable for her to bring back her version again for a fourth time to the House of Commons?
JM: Well, she’s the Prime Minister. She’s entitled to do that if she wishes. I don’t know what the Commons will decide. I suspect they may well add something related to the customs union, an alignment with the single market to her deal and if they add that to her deal it’s not perfect, it’s far from perfect.

AM: But it could go through.
JM: I think it could go through and it might be the least bad option in the circumstances we’re in other than reversing the whole thing. I mean the problem that parliament –

AM: She has to follow the will of parliament on this because there is a genuine constitutional argument about what’s more important. The manifestos the people stood on or their judgements now. As
it were the sovereignty of parliament or the General Electoral system which matters more at this moment.

JM: I think what matters most at the moment is a decision that will safeguard the living standards and other national interests of the British nation. And I think things have changed. When circumstances change you change your mind, a wise man once said that and it remains as true today as it was. So I think it is for Members of Parliament to say the Brexit we are offering you bears very little relationship, if any, to the Brexit that you thought you were going to get when you voted in June 2016, and for that reason, we, parliamentarians, have had to make a judgement upon what we believe is the best way forward. And I think that is what they should do.

AM: But there’s an awful lot of people watching this programme right now we feel that they have been let down and betrayed by the political class. They were offered a very straightforward question, should we leave the EU or not and they voted saying yes, we should, and people like yourself sat in that very chair, or a chair very like it and said if it happens there’s only one referendum, no going back. In fact here’s a clip of it.

[CLIP]
Sir John Major
Speaking in December 2015
‘If we come out we are out. That’s it. It’s not politically credible to go back and say we’ve reconsidered, let’s have another referendum. If we vote to stay out then we are out and we will have to get on with it.’

Sir John Major
Speaking in May 2016
‘There won’t be another referendum on Europe. This is it.’
AM: And that is what you told people during the referendum. You can see why they’re frustrated?

JM: Yes of course I can see why they’re frustrated. Both sides are frustrated. There are 15 million people who voted to remain who’ve been frustrated but they appear to have been locked out of the debate and out of the decisions that have been taken. So we face frustration on either side and when circumstances change, I repeat, you have to make a judgement as to what is the best way forward. And the best way forward is not to wreck the British economy. The best way forward is not to wreck our international reputation and the best way forward is not to wreck our constitutional relationships which are at risk if we crash out without a deal on the hardest of hard Brexits. So if nobody is going to get everything they wish then we have to find a compromise and I think that compromise, as I said a moment ago, may well be by adding a customs union, which many people will dislike, I’m not wholly enthusiastic about it and alignment to the single market to the Prime Minister’s deal and I think if you did that you would be very wise in the long term to put that to the nation so they can decide whether or not they wish that or whether they are prepared for something else. But let me make it clear. Whatever choices the Prime Minister and the Cabinet make a lot of people are going to be upset about it. And it is a time for people to try and restore the sort of civilised debate and exchanges that were symptomatic of the House of Commons and that more recently have not been.

AM: And do you think we could go through another referendum with that intact? I mean you saw, we both saw the anger in Trafalgar – in Parliament Square, beg your pardon, from the pro-Brexit marchers, but also a lot of anger from the pro-Remain march, the million-strong march the week before. People are very heated and het up at the moment, a referendum would surely just fuel that.
JM: Well, I think it depends on how the leaders of the referendum conduct themselves. If the leaders of the referendum deal with genuine arguments and we don’t have the nature of referendum we did have from time to time in 2016, then I think it is perfectly possible in a nation like the United Kingdom to conduct one. If people are determined to cause disorder in the streets, then they certainly may be able to do so but I think the British nation would know how to judge them and perhaps would vote against what they’re advocating.

AM: Meanwhile your party has decided that the version of Brexit that’s going to be chosen is not going to be the British people’s. But, for a leadership election, you pick up the newspapers today and it’s full of runners and riders and people pirouetting around in different kinds of clothes and so forth. What do you think when you see that?

JM: Well, I think they should concentrate on the decision we should make next week, not who’s going to be prime minister at some future stage. I find it extraordinarily odd, there are people who decided that the prime minister’s deal was going to turn us into a vassal state and they voted against it. Once it is apparent there is going to be a leadership election and one of them might become prime minister, the question of a vassal state disappears and they support it. Now, I think the public will be very cynical about that. I don’t know when the prime minister will go, nobody can be certain, but she has said at some stage she will. But when we elect a new prime minister I think it has to be someone who can be a national leader not a factional leader. And I think that does disqualify a number of candidates.

AM: I’m cudgelling my brains to work out who you may be talking about. But I do recall last time we were talking, we were talking about the NHS and you aid the NHS, 'is about as safe with Boris Johnson and Michael Gove as a pet hamster would be with a
hungry python.’ Is Brexit as safe with them as a hamster with a python?

JM: I’ve just said we need civilised debate. I’m going to stick to it. But I observe about the national health service and education, and everything else, that they have been substantially wiped off the national agenda by the preoccupation with Brexit over so long. So it is necessary to get this matter solved so that it can be dealt with as a routine government matter when we get to the trade talks, as soon as possible. Because the ambitions the prime minister set out on the day she stood on the doorstep of Downing Street are still ambitions that parliament must turn its mind to. And they are very important and we cannot ignore those.

AM: I vividly remember you standing down, to everyone’s surprise, as Conservative leader and taking on your opponents. Theresa May has said something equally odd in a sense, that if she gets a withdrawal agreement through then she will stand down as Tory leader. If she doesn’t get it through do you think she can stay on as Tory leader?

JM: Well, I think that’s a matter yet to be determined. I’m not entirely sure, given the way she has been treated by some of her colleagues, that she would particularly wish to, or indeed anyone would. But I can’t answer what’s in the prime minister’s mind. I don’t know.

AM: Slightly different question: do you think changing the leader of the Conservative Party at the moment solves anything?

JM: I don’t think it solves very much. Of course, a new leader may, depending upon who it is, have less baggage than a prime minister who’s had to fight for everything from the moment she went into Downing Street. So that would change. But it doesn’t change the numbers. It doesn’t change the arithmetic. It doesn’t
change the instincts and convictions of people both in the Remain and in the Leave camp. So it doesn’t change those things no.

AM: Looking for consensus across the Conservative Party, difficult at the moment, but there’s been a lot of people from different wings of the party tweeting about the treatment of Dominic Grieve, who you remember is a colleague in the House of Commons, has been deselected by his local Conservative Party. What are your reflections on that?

JM: Well, I don’t think he’s been deselected, if I may say so. I think he lost a vote of confidence. He’s not yet deselected.

AM: It’s part of the process of deselection.

JM: And I hope he won’t be. It’s a pretty un-Conservative thing to do. Traditionally the Conservative Party have taken the Burkeian view that members are there to use their best judgement in the interests of their constituency. Dominic Grieve has done that with a great deal of courage and with a great deal of skill. It is people of his abilities that the Conservative Party should be attracting, not repelling.

AM: Do you think the Conservative Party can survive either a no deal Brexit or a long extension, maybe another referendum and either a soft Brexit or no Brexit at all? It looks as if it is about to divide right down the middle.

JM: Well, the Conservative Party has had great divisions in the past. But our nation is always going to have a centre-right party and a centre-left party, whether that is exactly the same Conservative Party as we have now or not, I can’t be certain. But that there will be a Conservative Party on the centre-right of politics – but it needs to be the centre-right if it wishes to win, not the far right.
(ends)